

SMALL GRANTS RESEARCH PROGRAM REPORT

Towards a financially inclusive higher education system

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Towards a financially inclusive higher education system

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

At a glance

What we did

This report examined the prevalence and impact of financial hardship on university students. It evaluated the effectiveness of existing financial support services and identified barriers that prevent students from accessing essential assistance. It did so through:

- a desktop audit of financial aid services across 41 Australian universities
- a scoping review of the existing literature
- a national survey of over 900 students complemented by in-depth interviews
- both qualitative (interview) and quantitative (survey) data on the experiences of university staff.

What we found

- Financial hardship is widespread, with one in three students experiencing financial insecurity, particularly international students, Indigenous students, and students living with a disability.
- While most universities offer financial aid services, significant barriers remain—only 21.6% of students were aware of available financial support, and nearly half of these students found application processes were too complex.
- Financial stress was linked to increased dropout rates, lower academic performance, and adverse mental health outcomes.
- While emergency aid and scholarships are available at many universities, these initiatives are under-promoted, often lack sufficient funding, and fail to provide long-term financial stability for the students.

What we recommend

Government funded payment schemes, such as Youth Allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY, should be enhanced to reflect the actual financial needs of all Australian university students.

Universities should:

- develop comprehensive Financial Inclusion Plans
- improve webpage design and accessibility of their financial aid information
- expand emergency support services
- enhance non-monetary support services, such as providing discounted textbooks, subsidised meal plans, and on-campus services to alleviate financial pressures
- simplify application processes for aid.

These recommendations have been used to develop guidelines—*Improving the Financial Wellbeing of Australian University Students*—and a poster (see Appendices 10.1 and 10.2).

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Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------|---|
| ACSES | Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success |
| AOR | Adjusted Odds Ratios |
| CRICOS | Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students |
| ESOS | Education Services for Overseas Students |
| HECS-HELP | Higher Education Contribution Scheme—Higher Education Loan Program |
| HREC | Human Research Ethics Committee |
| NSW | New South Wales |
| SES | Socio-economic status |
| SPSS | Statistical Package for the Social Sciences |
| UOW | University of Wollongong |
| WA | Western Australia |

1. Executive summary

Financial stress is a growing concern among university students in Australia, with rising tuition fees, housing costs, and food insecurity significantly impacting their academic performance, mental and physical well-being, and overall university experience. *Towards a financially inclusive higher education system* examines the prevalence and impact of financial hardship on university students, evaluates the effectiveness of existing financial support services, and identifies barriers that prevent students from accessing essential assistance. The project provides evidence-based recommendations to improve financial inclusion and optimise student participation in higher education by reducing financial constraints that hinder engagement and success.

This project focuses on evaluating both the challenges that students face and the effectiveness of financial aid programs and non-monetary support initiatives. It highlights key mechanisms that may help students navigate financial difficulties while pursuing their education. As the findings indicate, without adequate support, financial hardship can severely impact students' academic outcomes, their mental and physical well-being, and their overall university experience. These challenges disproportionately affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds, limiting their ability to engage fully in and benefit from higher education.

To explore these issues, the project employed a mixed-methods approach, including a desktop audit of financial aid services across 41 Australian universities, a scoping review of the existing literature, a national survey of over 900 students complemented by in-depth interviews, and both qualitative (interview) and quantitative (survey) data on the experiences of university staff. The project examined students' financial circumstances, awareness and use of existing university support services, and the broader impact of financial stress on their education and well-being. The multifaceted approach provided a well-rounded evaluation of financial hardship in higher education and the effectiveness of existing institutional support systems.

The key findings reveal that financial hardship is widespread, with one in three students experiencing financial insecurity, particularly international students, Indigenous students, and students living with a disability. While most universities offer financial aid services, significant barriers remain—only 21.6% of students were aware of available financial support, and nearly half of these students found application processes were too complex. Financial stress was linked to increased dropout rates, lower academic performance, and adverse mental health outcomes. Additionally, while emergency aid and scholarships are available at many universities, these initiatives are perceived to be under-promoted, often lack sufficient funding, and fail to provide long-term financial stability for the students.

This report presents targeted recommendations for universities, policymakers, and student support services, emphasising a need for clearer financial aid policies, streamlined application processes, centralised promotion of services, broader eligibility criteria, and enhanced financial literacy programs. Addressing these systemic issues is essential for creating a financially inclusive higher education system—one that ensures all students, regardless of their background, have an opportunity to succeed.

1.1 Key findings

Key findings (see Table 1) include:

- One in three students (32%) report financial hardship, with international students, Indigenous students, and students living with a disability disproportionately affected.
- 86% of universities have dedicated financial support web pages, yet awareness and accessibility remain an issue for many students.
- Expanded emergency support services are needed. Increasing the availability of emergency grants and crisis assistance will help prevent financial hardship from disrupting students' education.
- Scholarships and fee assistance strategies are the most common support services, but barriers such as eligibility criteria and a lack of staff and student awareness hinder their effectiveness.
- Non-monetary supports, including food programs (100%) are widely available, while emergency financial aid (73%) was available in most Australian universities considered in this project.
- Enhancing government-funded payment schemes, such as Youth Allowance, Austudy, and ABSTUDY to reflect the actual financial needs of all Australian university students is needed.

Table 1: Key findings from studies

| Study | Research focus | Key findings | Recommendations |
|---|---|---|--|
| Desktop audit of financial hardship support for students | Reviewed financial aid policies and resources across 41 Australian universities. | A total of 38% of universities audited had a financial inclusion strategy, while 86% had financial aid webpages, 48% of students found them hard to navigate. Most institutions offered scholarships and bursaries, but emergency aid was underfunded . | Universities need clearer financial aid policies, easier application processes, and explicit and clear communication about available support. |
| Scoping review on financial stress and university support | Examined existing literature on financial challenges faced by university students in Australia and interventions to support them. | Up to 68% of students face significant financial stress related to high emotional stress (96%) and poor academic performance . International students, Indigenous students, and students living with disabilities face greater financial challenges . Existing support services lack accessibility and awareness among students. | Universities should establish targeted financial aid , increase financial literacy programs, and enhance awareness campaigns for available support. |
| Student financial hardship survey and interviews | Surveyed 907 students on their financial situation and coping strategies. Interviewed 34 students to understand their lived experiences. | In total 32% of students reported financial insecurity; 51% experienced food insecurity. 64% struggled with housing affordability; 46% found tuition fees burdensome. Only 21.6% were aware of university financial support, and 48% found applications too complex. The student interviews revealed aggravating factors (such as limited university services transparency) and enabling students support through buffering agents (such as housing security and access to enough food) contribute to financial buoyancy and overall student wellbeing . The latter are notably fundamental to empowering tertiary student success . | Universities need simplified aid application processes , broader eligibility for financial support, and increased non-monetary assistance (for example, subsidised housing and food banks). |
| Staff financial hardship survey—Staff perspective and interviews | Explored university staff perspectives on the financial challenges faced by students (<i>n</i> = 77). | Staff reported a lack of coordinated university financial support (48.9%) , with many students struggling. A total of 44.6% of students they worked with were barely managing, while 75.0% struggled with housing costs , and 70.6% experienced food insecurity . The most vulnerable groups included students living away from home (67.6%) and those with mental health-related disabilities (45.6%) . Financially, 59.5% relied on government aid , and 68.9% depended on part-time work . Staff interviews highlighted that daily living costs, such as rent, transport, and placements, are key financial challenges , especially for at-risk student groups . University staff have observed an increasing impact on wellbeing and academic performance . Despite existing university support systems, barriers remain and staff suggested further recommendations for improvements including changing the discourse to acknowledge students' financial vulnerability. | Universities need a more coordinated financial support system , expanded aid for vulnerable groups (for example, students living away from home, those with mental health-related disabilities), and enhanced non-monetary assistance (for example, affordable housing options, meal subsidies, and accessible food banks). |

2. Recommendations

This report provides targeted recommendations aimed at addressing financial hardship among university students in Australia. These recommendations are directed at specific stakeholders, including the Commonwealth Government, state governments, universities, student support offices, financial aid offices, industry partners, accrediting bodies, and student organisations. The goal is to improve financial inclusion, enhance support services, and reduce financial stress, ensuring students can successfully engage in higher education. These recommendations have been used to develop the guidelines—*Improving the financial wellbeing of Australian university students*—and poster (see Appendices 10.1 and 10.2).

2.1 Recommendations for the Commonwealth Government

2.1.1 Expand and improve financial aid programs

The Commonwealth Department of Education should:

- increase funding for need-based scholarships, emergency aid programs, and cost-of-living allowances to support all students who are facing financial hardships.
- introduce income-contingent financial aid models that minimise immediate financial strain on students.
- reduce HECS-HELP debt for students in fields of workplace shortage, at both a Federal and State level.

2.1.2 Reduce placement-related financial strain

The Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations should:

- develop stipends and travel subsidies for students who are undertaking unpaid placements in a wide range of disciplines as part of their study, particularly in education and healthcare fields.
- introduce mandatory financial compensation for placement-based learning to ease student financial burden.
- reimagine basic skills and knowledge for graduates and alternative experiential learning to demonstrate skills to revisit placement requirements, together with professional bodies.

2.1.3 Enhance public transport and housing support for students

- The Commonwealth and state governments should ensure access to subsidised public transport for international students in all states/territories and review university parking fees to reduce commuting costs.
- State governments should collaborate with universities to expand affordable student housing initiatives, including rental assistance options and subsidised accommodation schemes.
- Students undertaking (health) placement should have access to subsidised parking at healthcare sites to support their clinical placement learnings.

2.1.4 Advocate for systemic policy changes

Universities and student advocacy groups should:

- lobby for tuition fees to be reduced or for the implementation of flexible payment models for students, especially for high-cost degrees such as medicine and clinical psychology.
- support government-funded financial literacy education programs, with subsidised access for students from low-income backgrounds, to help them manage debt and expenses effectively.
- distribute strategic communications to the broader Australian public around the critical nature of a diverse and supported student community for the future of Australia.

2.2 Recommendations for universities

2.2.1 Develop comprehensive financial inclusion strategies

University equity and student support offices should:

- establish institution-wide financial inclusion plans that integrate tuition relief and adequate reserves for emergency aid, food security programs, and rental assistance.
- ensure financial wellbeing is considered in student-focused policies and procedures.
- identify an Executive Champion or Sponsor for Financial Inclusion at all universities.
- establish a senior financial inclusion taskforce or reference group to guide the university's response and investment, with the student voice at the forefront of these internal conversations.

2.2.2 Expand emergency financial support services

University financial aid offices should:

- increase access and seek permanent funding for emergency grants, short-term loans, and crisis funding with fast-track application processes for students in urgent need.
- enhance the visibility of these services through targeted multi-platform promotions to increase student awareness and access across the University campuses.

2.2.3 Improve student housing affordability

- Universities should partner with local governments and private housing providers to develop low-cost student accommodation and rental assistance programs.

2.2.4 Strengthen food security initiatives

Universities should:

- expand free meal programs, campus food banks, breakfast programs, support campus community food gardens, and subsidised meals to assist students experiencing food insecurity.
- include supported agreements in leasing of food providers to ensure initiatives are upheld.
- enhance visibility of these services to increase student awareness and access.

2.2.5 Increase on-campus employment and paid internships

- University career services should collaborate with local businesses and industry partners to offer paid internships, on-campus jobs, and flexible employment opportunities for students, especially vulnerable groups, during their enrolment.

2.2.6 Simplify financial aid processes

- Universities should implement a user-friendly, centralised online system for financial aid applications, reducing administrative complexity.
- Financial support webpages should be redesigned to be easily accessible and provide clear, step-by-step guidance.

2.2.7 Enhance financial literacy and budgeting support

Universities should:

- integrate financial literacy workshops into student orientation programs and academic courses using real-to-life scenarios to increase relevance.
- provide personal one-to-one financial counselling and budgeting tools for students where needed (supported by external providers or embedded into commerce degree curricula, to enable real-world learning opportunities for students).

2.2.8 Targeted support for at-risk student groups

Universities should:

- prioritise financial aid for international students, Indigenous students, students living with a disability, students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, and those required to complete mandatory unpaid professional placements.
- expand tailored scholarship programs and mentorship initiatives to support these vulnerable groups.
- update related procedures and policies to ensure that changes are sustained.
- implement program logics along with evaluation plans to measure the impact and effectiveness of financial supports for vulnerable student cohorts including:
 - international students
 - students who identify as First Nations or Indigenous Australians
 - students living with a disability
 - students who are caregivers or sole parents
 - students from lower SES backgrounds

- students from remote or rural areas
- students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

2.2.9 Teaching and learning

Universities should:

- offer block or trimester-based models that increase students' capacity to engage in paid work and university study concurrently.
- implement flexible modes of delivery for teaching and learning to enable students to balance work and personal commitments.
- prioritise tutorial enrolment for students with significant caring responsibilities and automated extensions for assessments.
- embed financial and food literacy into curriculum.

2.3 Recommendations for student support offices and student unions

2.3.1 Increase awareness of financial support services

- Student unions and university support offices should actively and regularly promote financial aid programs, emergency funds, and welfare services through multiple channels, including email, social media, and student portals, and provide clear direction to academic and professional staff to ensure they can guide students to available support.

2.3.2 Reduce stigma around financial aid

- Universities should launch awareness campaigns and student testimonials to normalise the use of financial support services and encourage students to seek help.

2.3.3 Enhance mental health and physical health support for financially stressed students

University counselling centres should:

- provide free or subsidised mental health services, with a focus on addressing financial stress management.
- expand access to on-campus healthcare services, including subsidised GP visits and allied health support, to ensure students facing financial hardship can access necessary bulk billed medical care.
- establish peer mentorship programs and student-led financial support groups to foster a supportive community.
- utilise data-driven decision-making related to student use of support services to determine areas of most need.

2.4 Recommendations for industry and community partners

2.4.1 Increase industry-supported student financial aid

- Industry organisations should be encouraged to partner with universities to establish private scholarships, work-study programs, and financial sponsorships for university students.
- Employers should be encouraged to provide flexible work arrangements for student employees.

2.4.2 Develop collaborative housing and transport solutions

- Community groups and housing providers should be encouraged to work with universities to develop affordable student housing programs.
- Public transport authorities should implement equitable student discounts and subsidies to reduce commuting costs, ensuring international students, those from low SES areas, and all students have fair access to affordable transport.
- Public transport authorities should implement accessible transport options to ensure that students living with a disability can commute to their university.

2.5 Recommendations for research and policy evaluation

2.5.1 Regularly assess student financial wellbeing

- Universities should conduct annual student financial hardship surveys to track trends and assess the effectiveness of financial aid programs.
- Data-driven insights should be used to refine and improve financial assistance services.

2.5.2 Standardise financial support information across universities

- A national framework should be developed to ensure consistency in financial aid eligibility criteria for self-funding students, streamlined application processes, and connection to available support.
- Universities should collaborate to share best practice interventions in financial aid provision.
- Universities should trial and evaluate support programs based on student-driven needs.

3. Introduction

Financial hardship among university students is an escalating issue that profoundly affects academic success, mental health, and long-term career prospects. Higher education is often seen as a pathway to financial stability and professional advancement, yet for many students, the financial burden of attaining a degree can be overwhelming. Rising tuition fees, accommodation expenses, food insecurity, mandatory unpaid placements, costs of living with a disability, and the struggle to balance paid work with academic commitments contribute to significant financial stress that can be prolonged well into their careers.

In Australia, the cost of tertiary education is largely borne by students, with limited government assistance to cover essential living costs. While schemes like HECS-HELP provide relief for tuition fees, they do not address the growing expenses of rent, utilities, food, and transport. As a result, many students face persistent financial insecurity, which disproportionately affects marginalised groups such as Indigenous students, students living with a disability, and those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Research consistently demonstrates that financial stressors lead to increased anxiety, reduced class attendance, and, in severe cases, course withdrawals—ultimately hindering educational attainment and career progression, especially for vulnerable groups.

Two particularly pressing concerns for university students are food insecurity and housing affordability. Studies reveal that a significant portion of university students frequently skip meals or rely on low-cost, low-nutrient food choices due to financial constraints. Similarly, housing instability forces many students into precarious, unsafe, or overcrowded living conditions, exacerbating both academic and mental health struggles. These issues highlight the urgent need for accessible, effective, and well-integrated financial support mechanisms.

While Australian universities offer a range of financial aid services—including scholarships, emergency grants, and subsidised food programs—awareness and accessibility remain major challenges. Many students are either unaware of these resources or struggle to navigate complex application processes. Social stigma persists for students accessing emergency food relief. Additionally, financial support services are often fragmented and inconsistent, lacking a cohesive national strategy to address the underlying causes of student financial hardship.

3.1 What the report covers

This report examines the extent of financial hardship among Australian university students, evaluates the effectiveness of existing financial aid services, and explores the barriers preventing students from accessing necessary assistance. It presents a comprehensive analysis of:

- the financial challenges faced by Australian university students during a period of high and sustained inflation, assessing the impact, and examining students' awareness and utilisation of support mechanisms.
- the existing evidence on the extent and impact of financial challenges experienced by university students in Australia and New Zealand and examines approaches that are implemented by universities in these countries to address these challenges.

- the extent and accessibility of financial hardship support offered across Australian universities, with a focus on financial inclusion plans, accessibility of resources, and the type of support available.
- evidence-based recommendations for universities, policymakers, and student support services to create a more financially inclusive higher education system.

3.2 Structure of the report

The report is structured as follows:

- **Background:** Provides context on student financial hardship in Australia and its broader implications.
- **Methods:** Outlines the project approach, including a desktop audit of university financial support services, a scoping review of the scientific literature, a national student survey, a university staff survey, and in-depth interviews with students and university staff.
- **Findings:** Presents data on the prevalence of financial stress, food and housing insecurity, barriers to accessing support services, and the effectiveness of existing financial aid mechanisms.
- **Discussion:** Analyses the implications of financial hardship, linking key findings to academic performance, mental health, and long-term student success.
- **Recommendations:** Offers targeted strategies for universities, governments, industry partners, and student advocacy groups to improve financial inclusion and student wellbeing.
- **Conclusion:** Summarises key insights and emphasises the importance of systemic policy changes and institutional reforms to ensure all students can thrive in higher education.

By providing a detailed examination of financial hardship in Australian universities and proposing practical solutions, this report aims to contribute to developing a fairer, more sustainable, and inclusive higher education system—one in which no student is forced to compromise their education due to their financial stress.

4. Background

Higher education has long been regarded as a key driver of economic and social mobility. However, the rising costs associated with pursuing a university degree, combined with socio-economic disparities, have made it increasingly difficult for many students to access and complete tertiary education. Financial hardship among university students is a growing concern worldwide, with direct consequences for academic performance, mental health, and long-term career prospects.

4.1 The economic landscape of higher education

The financial challenges faced by university students are not new, but they have intensified in the 21st century due to economic volatility and escalating costs (Johnstone, 2002). Higher education expenses—including tuition, accommodation, and purchase of essential study materials—have outpaced inflation, increasing financial strain on students (Reid, 2024). While government initiatives such as the HECS-HELP funding scheme in Australia allow students to defer tuition payments until they reach a specific income threshold, these provisions do not cover essential living expenses such as rent, utilities, and food, which continue to impose a significant burden on students.

Moreover, broader economic trends such as inflation, stagnating wages, and unstable job markets have exacerbated financial insecurity. Recent data suggests that students are facing heightened financial stress due to the rising cost of living and limited job opportunities. These challenges disproportionately affect marginalised student groups, including Indigenous students, those from low SES backgrounds, students living with a disability, and those from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Hossain et al., 2008; NCSEHE, 2016).

4.2 The impact of financial hardship on students

Financial difficulties significantly impact students' academic success, wellbeing, and overall quality of life. Research has consistently linked financial hardship to poor academic performance, higher dropout rates, and increased mental health concerns (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Robotham & Julian, 2006). A national survey conducted by Universities Australia found that nearly half of university students surveyed experience moderate to severe financial stress, with 25% considering leaving their studies due to the financial pressures (Universities Australia, 2018).

Many students are forced to balance part-time work with full-time studies, often at the expense of their academic success (Hordósy et al., 2018). A 2006 survey revealed that 13% of Australian students had to forgo necessities such as food and medical care due to financial hardship (James et al., 2007). By 2012, this figure had increased by 30%, with students frequently missing classes due to work commitments (Bexley et al., 2013). Regional disparities further exacerbate these challenges, as students from rural and remote areas bear higher financial burdens due to relocation costs, limited employment options, and increased travel expenses (Devlin & McKay, 2017).

4.3 Student debt, food insecurity, and housing challenges

The accumulation of student debt remains a pressing concern. While HECS-HELP loans might be available for some and provide a flexible repayment structure, rising tuition costs mean that students graduate with increasing debt levels (Rafferty et al., 2024). To manage financial strain, many students work long hours, which can negatively affect their academic performance and lead to delayed graduation (Triventi, 2014). The psychological toll of financial stress is significant, with students experiencing heightened anxiety, depression, and stress due to their economic circumstances (Adams et al., 2016).

Food insecurity is a particularly alarming issue, with many students regularly skipping meals due to financial constraints. A 2024 study found that 78% of students undertaking professional placements for their studies experienced food insecurity, with 30% facing severe food insecurity—meaning they had to skip meals and go hungry (Lambert, Austin, Charlton, Heins, et al., 2024). Notably many universities have introduced food assistance programs, such as campus food banks, breakfast programs and subsidised meal options, but these initiatives remain insufficient to address the broader issue (Kent et al., 2024).

Housing affordability is another major challenge. Many students struggle to secure stable and affordable accommodation, particularly in metropolitan areas where rental prices are higher (AIHW, 2024). As a result, some students live in overcrowded or unsafe conditions, while others endure long commutes to their university that add further financial and logistical burdens (Cook et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2020).

4.4 The role of universities and government policies

Governments and universities have implemented various policies and support services to alleviate financial pressures on students. In Australia, federal policies mandate financial support services for students, including the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Compliance Standard 6, which requires universities to provide financial support for international students (Department of Education, 2022). Additionally, the Support for Students Policy mandates that universities communicate available financial support options to all students (Department of Education, 2024).

Despite these legal requirements, many students struggle to access clear information about available resources, and university staff often remain unaware of financial inclusion policies (O’Shea et al., 2021). While universities have introduced measures such as emergency grants, food pantries, and mental health counselling, these interventions often fail to address the systemic nature of student financial distress (Idehai et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024). Barriers such as lack of awareness, stigma, and logistical constraints limit the effectiveness of these services, highlighting the need for innovative and inclusive financial support strategies (Eichelberger et al., 2017).

4.5 Lessons learnt from financial crises and the COVID-19 pandemic

Historically, financial crises have disproportionately impacted university students. The 2007–2009 Global Financial Crisis significantly affected students' financial stability, with studies highlighting its adverse impact on quality of life and academic progression (Agheorghiesei et al., 2018; Hudson & Maioli, 2010). In Greece, financial difficulties during this period discouraged students from pursuing postgraduate qualifications (Azaria et al., 2019). Similarly, in Australia, the Global Financial Crisis had a lasting effect on young adults aged 19–22 years, increasing financial strain (Parker et al., 2016).

While there were some improvements in students' financial circumstances by 2017; 14% still reported going without necessities (Arkoudis et al., 2018) and vulnerable groups continued to experience significant hardship. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated student financial hardship, with many experiencing income reductions, employment instability, and greater reliance on occasional work (O'Shea et al., 2021). The pandemic's economic fallout has intensified financial pressures, particularly for students undertaking unpaid professional placements, who report high rates of food insecurity (Lambert, Austin, Charlton, Kennedy, et al., 2024).

The cumulative effects of rising education costs, economic downturns, and inadequate financial support services underscore the urgent need for comprehensive and equitable financial assistance strategies. Universities and policymakers must work together to enhance financial aid programs, improve student financial literacy, and develop long-term solutions to ensure that higher education remains accessible for all. Addressing financial insecurity among students is not only crucial for their academic success but also for promoting a more equitable and inclusive society.

5. Methods

This report employs a mixed-methods research approach to comprehensively assess student financial hardship in Australian universities. Three primary research methodologies were utilised: a desktop audit of university financial support services, a scoping review of existing scientific literature, and national student and staff survey and interviews. These studies were reviewed within the Socio-Ecological Model and Salutogenic Model (Antonovsky, 1996; Bronfenbrenner, 2000). This section details the methodological framework, data collection procedures, sampling techniques, and analysis strategies used.

5.1 Desktop audit

A systematic audit of 41 Australian university websites was conducted to assess the availability, accessibility, and comprehensiveness of financial support services from a student /prospective student perspective. The audit aimed to evaluate:

- the presence of dedicated financial support webpages.
- the clarity and user-friendliness of navigation to financial assistance information.
- the existence of financial inclusion policies at the institutional level.
- the types of financial support offered, including scholarships, bursaries, and emergency grants.
- the availability of non-monetary assistance, such as food programs, discounted services, and financial counselling.

Each university website was systematically examined by current university students, using a standardised checklist of 18 questions completed in Qualtrics (see Appendix 10.3) to ensure consistency in the data collection. Universities were categorised based on the level of financial support available, allowing for comparative analysis across institutions. The data were downloaded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which facilitated thematic categorisation and statistical summary generation.

5.2 Scoping review

To contextualise financial hardship among university students, a scoping review was conducted following the Arksey and O'Malley framework (Levac et al., 2010). The review sought to explore:

- the prevalence and impact of financial stress among students.
- the effectiveness of university-based financial aid programs.
- comparative studies on student financial wellbeing across different higher education systems globally.

The literature search included peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and policy documents. The databases utilised included Scopus, ProQuest, Web of Science, and Informit. The search terms included “student financial hardship,” “higher education financial support,” “student debt,” and “food insecurity among students”.

The inclusion criteria for the scoping review were:

- studies published in English within the last 15 years.
- research focused on Australian higher education institutions or international comparative studies.
- empirical studies, systematic reviews, and policy analyses.

Two independent researchers conducted the initial title and abstract screening, followed by full-text reviews. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion with a third researcher. The final dataset was synthesised using thematic analysis, identifying key trends and gaps in the literature. A manuscript of the findings has been published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

5.3 Student survey and interview

A national survey was conducted between September and October 2024, targeting students across various Australian universities. The survey was distributed via university networks, student unions, and social media platforms to ensure broad participation. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC2024/143).

5.3.1 Survey design and sample selection

The survey was designed to assess:

- socio-demographic characteristics of students.
- the extent and nature of financial hardship experienced.
- awareness and utilisation of financial support services.
- the impact of financial stress on academic performance and wellbeing.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure representation of diverse student populations, including domestic and international students, students from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous students, and those living with disabilities. The survey instrument comprised 43 questions, including multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. To enhance validity, survey questions were adapted from previous national studies on student financial wellbeing and were pilot tested for construct validity among the research team.

5.3.2 Data collection and analysis

Survey responses were collected anonymously via the Qualtrics online platform. To minimise duplicate entries, IP addresses were recorded, and manual checks for data integrity were performed. Surveys with less than 30% completion were excluded from the analysis.

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 30. Descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and logistic regression analyses were conducted to identify key predictors of financial hardship. A multivariate analysis was performed to determine associations between financial stress and academic performance.

Qualitative responses from open-ended questions underwent thematic content analysis. Thematic coding was conducted independently by two researchers to identify recurring patterns in student narratives related to financial hardship and coping mechanisms.

Student interviews were conducted to understand students' perspectives about how their financial difficulties and the strategies undertaken to manage this impact. All survey participants were provided with the option of completing an individual semi-structured interview with a member of the research team. The Participant Information Sheet was provided to potential participants, and voluntary consent was obtained before conducting the interview. The interview questions explored:

- financial and other impacts during their degree progression—for example, transport, accommodation, living expenses, other unanticipated expenses, and amount of debt incurred.
- strategies used to reduce costs and improve financial and overall wellbeing.
- awareness of financial wellbeing support services available.
- suggestions to improve financial study-related concerns.

Inductive coding on 30% of the interviews was conducted by two researchers within NVivo. The remaining interviews were reviewed using Microsoft Copilot to check for additional themes. Deductive logic was used to include all student interviews, with final codes agreed by two researchers. Final themes were derived by consensus and verbatim quotations were used to authenticate key themes and subthemes.

5.3.3 Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the survey and interviews. Data confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Student participants were given the option to withdraw at any time without penalty. The research adhered to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

5.4 Staff survey and interview

The Financial Inclusion Staff Survey aimed to explore university staff perspectives on the financial challenges faced by students. Data collection took place between October 2024 and February 2025, targeting student-facing staff across various Australian and New Zealand universities. The survey was distributed through university networks, student unions, and other public staff channels.

5.4.1 Survey design and sample selection

A methodology similar to the student survey and interview was used for the staff survey and interview, with a single ethics approval covering both. The survey gathered data on staff awareness, experiences, and insights into student financial distress, including housing and food insecurity, tuition costs, and access to university support services. It also examined the effectiveness of existing university financial aid mechanisms and institutional responses to student poverty.

The survey instrument consisted of 34 questions, incorporating multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended formats. Like the student survey, the staff survey questions were adapted

from previous national studies on student financial wellbeing and pilot-tested amongst the research team. Again, all survey participants were provided with the option of completing an individual semi-structured interview with a member of the research team.

Mirroring the student interviews, the staff interviews sought to gain in-depth insights into university staff perspectives on the nature and impact of financial stressors affecting students. Additionally, they aimed to identify existing support practices, policies, and strategies designed to enhance student engagement, performance, and wellbeing.

Data collection and analysis, including the staff interviews, followed the same procedures and ethical considerations as those applied to the student survey and interview, ensuring consistency and comparability between the two datasets.

5.5 Limitations

While this research provides a comprehensive analysis of student financial hardship, some limitations exist:

- The survey relied on self-reported data, which may introduce response bias.
- The desktop audit only considered publicly available information, which may not fully capture the extent of university financial support services.
- The cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to establish causation between financial hardship and academic outcomes.

Future research could employ longitudinal methodologies to track financial stressors and student outcomes over time and continue to include qualitative interviews to gain deeper insights into student experiences.

6. Findings

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the financial challenges faced by university students in Australia, the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms, and areas where improvements are required. The study examined financial hardship, student access to university-provided financial aid, and the overall impact of financial stress on academic performance and wellbeing. The findings directly answer the research questions and inform the recommendations presented in this report.

6.1 Prevalence and impact of financial hardship

Financial hardship is a widespread and growing concern among university students. The national survey ($n = 907$) revealed that 32% of students experienced financial insecurity, struggling to afford tuition fees, housing, food, and essential study materials. Of these, international students, Indigenous students, and students living with disabilities are disproportionately affected (see Table 2), often due to limited access to employment, social support, or government aid. In addition, students living alone faced higher odds of financial insecurity:

- Housing affordability is a major concern, with 64% of students who reported difficulty securing stable and affordable accommodation. Rising rental prices in metropolitan areas have forced some students into shared housing, long commutes, or precarious living situations.
- Food insecurity remains prevalent, with 51% of students indicating they skip meals or rely on low-cost, low-nutrient food choices due to financial constraints. This significantly impacts their physical health, energy levels, and academic concentration.
- Tuition costs remain a major source of financial stress, with 46% of students reporting difficulties paying university fees. While some students rely on scholarship stipends and government loans, many feel that these options do not adequately cover the full cost of education especially for self-funded students.

These financial pressures directly affect academic performance. Nearly half (44.8%) of students reported that financial stress has negatively affected their studies, leading to increased absenteeism, difficulty focusing, and lower grades. Furthermore, 21% of students considered deferring their studies due to financial hardship.

Table 2 presents adjusted odds ratios from the logistic regression analysis that was conducted to identify student groups at higher risk of financial insecurity.

Table 2: Students at higher risk of financial insecurity

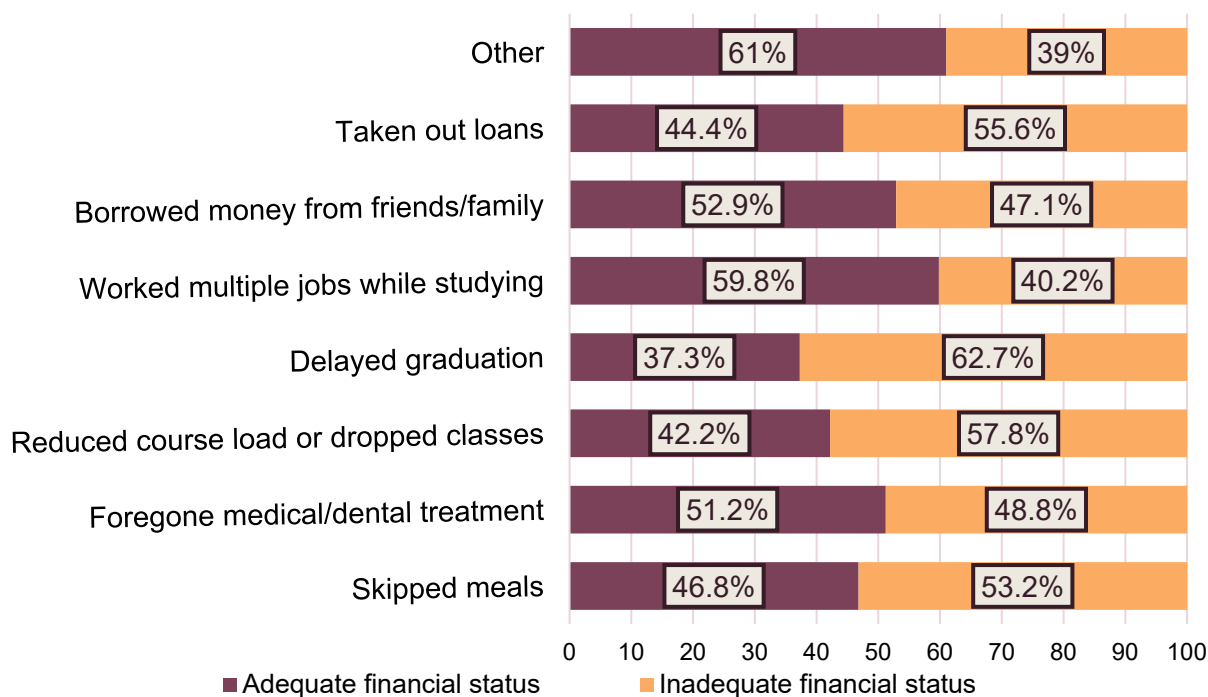
| | Adjusted Odds Ratio (95% CI), p-value | Interpretation |
|--|--|---|
| Gender (Male vs. Female) | 1.15 (0.83–1.58), p = 0.412 | No significant impact of gender. |
| Age (vs. 18–24) | | No significant impact of age. |
| 25 – 29 years | 1.15 (0.77–1.73), p = 0.486 | |
| 30 – 39 years | 0.96 (0.56–1.65), p = 0.893 | |
| ≥40 | 1.38 (0.76–2.54), p = 0.294 | |
| Enrolment status (International vs. Domestic) | 1.59 (1.09–2.33), p = 0.017 | International students have higher odds of financial insecurity compared to domestic students. |
| Aboriginal/Indigenous status (Yes vs. No) | 2.43 (1.37–4.32), p = 0.003 | Aboriginal/Indigenous students have higher odds of financial insecurity relative to non-Indigenous peers. |
| Disability status (Yes vs. No) | 1.76 (1.13–2.73), p = 0.012 | Students living with a disability have higher odds of experiencing financial insecurity compared to others. |
| Living situation (vs. Living with parents) | | Students living alone have higher odds of financial insecurity compared to those living with parents. |
| With partner/dependents | 1.44 (0.87–2.39), p = 0.162 | |
| With friends/housemates | 1.35 (0.89–2.04), p = 0.159 | |
| Living alone | 1.88 (1.14–3.08), p = 0.013 | |

Note: The Adjusted Odds Ratios (AOR) are derived from a multivariable logistic regression model controlling for gender, age category, enrolment status (international vs. domestic), Aboriginal/Indigenous status, disability status, and living situation. Each AOR represents the independent association between that predictor and the odds of inadequate financial security, holding the other variables constant.

6.2 Coping strategies

Figure 1 illustrates the disparities in the challenges students face based on their financial status while studying. Students with inadequate financial status particularly demonstrated a proactive engagement with their challenges, often finding innovative ways to manage their financial stress. These strategies, while indicative of the struggles faced, also reflect a strong resilience and resourcefulness among students. Students with inadequate financial status frequently encountered significant hardships: approximately 53% ($n = 221$) of students who skipped meals were students with inadequate financial status. Almost 50% ($n = 204$) forewent medical or dental treatment, and around 57% ($n = 78$) reduced their course load or dropped classes. In contrast, students with adequate financial status experienced these issues to a lesser extent, with about 46% ($n = 195$) of students who skipped meals being financially adequate and about 42% ($n = 57$) reducing their course load or dropping classes. Both groups showed a similar tendency to forego healthcare, affecting around 46% ($n = 420$) of all students surveyed.

Figure 1: Strategies undertaken to address financial challenges faced by respondents ($n = 907$)



6.3 Awareness and utilisation of financial support services

While most universities offer financial support services such as emergency grants, scholarships, and hardship loans, awareness and uptake remain low:

- Only 21.6% of students were aware of financial support services available at their university.
- Of those aware, 48% found the application process difficult or unclear, citing complex eligibility requirements, extensive documentation, and long processing times as barriers.
- Students from disadvantaged backgrounds (such as those from low SES households and international students) were less likely to apply for financial aid due to perceived stigma or uncertainty regarding their eligibility.

Despite the presence of university financial aid, students frequently turned to informal coping mechanisms, including working multiple jobs, borrowing money from family or friends, and skipping essential expenses (such as healthcare or textbooks). These findings highlight the gap between the availability of support and its accessibility and usability.

6.4 Effectiveness of financial aid programs

While financial aid programs exist, their effectiveness in alleviating financial hardship varies significantly:

- Scholarships and grants are the most commonly available form of financial aid, but many students report that the eligibility criteria exclude those who experience intermittent financial distress and those who are not eligible for Centrelink or other government payments.
- Emergency financial aid programs provide short-term financial relief to students facing unexpected financial crises, such as sudden loss of income, housing insecurity, medical emergencies, or other urgent expenses that threaten their ability to continue their studies. However, demand often exceeds supply. Only 27% of students who applied for emergency financial aid reported receiving it, indicating that existing resources are inadequate to meet student needs.
- Non-monetary support services, such as free food pantries, community food gardens, subsidised textbooks, and financial counselling, were rated as highly beneficial by students who accessed them. However, many universities lack comprehensive non-monetary assistance programs, limiting the reach of these resources.

6.5 Barriers to accessing financial support

Students identified multiple barriers preventing them from accessing university financial aid programs:

- **Lack of awareness:** A significant proportion of students were unaware of the financial support options available, indicating gaps in university communication and outreach.
- **Administrative challenges:** Lengthy and complex application processes discouraged students from applying.
- **Eligibility restrictions:** Many financial aid programs have restrictive eligibility criteria that exclude students facing temporary financial hardship.
- **Stigma:** Some students hesitated to seek financial assistance due to perceived social stigma, especially international students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

6.6 The role of employment and government assistance

- Most students (74%) said they rely on paid employment to cover their living expenses, with 36% working more than 20 hours per week. This creates a work-study conflict, where students struggle to balance their academic responsibilities with employment obligations.
- Government financial assistance (such as Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY, and Austudy) provides essential relief for some students but does not sufficiently cover the full cost of living. Many students reported that income thresholds for government support were too low, disqualifying them despite their financial struggles.

6.7 Institutional differences in financial support provision

The desktop audit uncovered significant disparities in the scope, accessibility, and comprehensiveness of financial support services across Australian universities. While most institutions (85%; $n = 35$) maintained a dedicated webpage for financial assistance, the quality and usability of these pages varied greatly. Approximately 48% of students involved in the audit found the information difficult to navigate, citing issues such as vague content, lack of detail on available services, and confusing pathways that required contacting multiple departments. In some cases, key services like emergency loans or counselling were absent or buried under general support categories, which undermined their accessibility.

Only 38% of universities ($n = 15$) had a clearly articulated financial inclusion plan or strategy that went beyond listing basic scholarships and bursaries. These plans were typically broader in scope, incorporating wraparound services such as emergency aid, discounted textbooks, subsidised meals, and financial literacy training. Institutions with such structured plans were more likely to provide a holistic and student-centred response to financial

hardship, recognising that financial wellbeing affects not only academic performance but also mental health and retention.

Further, the audit revealed that the perspective of student satisfaction and confidence in financial support services was significantly higher at universities that offered both financial aid and integrated financial literacy programs. These institutions provided clearer pathways to support, used student-friendly language, and included examples of lived experience in their communications. Ratings from simulated current and prospective students also suggested stronger institutional trust where financial support offerings were transparent and easy to locate.

Conversely, a notable proportion of universities (25%) lacked any apparent financial grants, highlighting major gaps in critical support mechanisms. The variability in available services across institutions—ranging from minimal scholarship listings to comprehensive support ecosystems—underscores the lack of a sector-wide standard. As a result, the level of support a student receives may be significantly influenced by their university of enrolment, raising equity concerns.

Overall, the findings point to a clear need for more consistent and proactive approaches to financial hardship support. Universities should embed financial support within broader student equity strategies and prioritise user-centred webpage design to ensure students can access the help they need without additional stress or confusion.

6.8 Qualitative findings: Financial challenges, coping strategies, and their impact on student wellbeing

The qualitative data provided an in-depth exploration (from $n = 34$ students) of the financial challenges faced by students and the coping mechanisms they employed. Table 3 and Figure 2 summarise key themes and subthemes related to student experiences with financial stress, academic challenges, and overall wellbeing (See Appendix 10.4 for full table).

Overall student wellbeing impacts (the overarching theme) (see Figure 2) identified students' perspectives on how study stresses were implicated in mental health status, physical health status, academic success, and social engagement to enabling holistic student success. There were three major themes identified in the analysis underpinning the overarching theme including **financial buoyancy**, **buffering agents**, and **aggravating agents** all of which ladder up to empowering tertiary student success. The key aspects of each are summarised here:

- **Financial buoyancy** incorporates subthemes of students' ability to manage key needs: basic living costs adequacy, income sources reliability, and student financial literacy. Notably financial buoyancy was the key in addressing the subthemes within overall student wellbeing impacts and was undeniably affected by buffering agents and aggravating agents.
- **Buffering agents** acknowledges those key aspects that enable students to withstand challenges in general but connect to financial issues specifically such as having access to enough food, housing security, and social support (full list in Table 3).

- **Aggravating agents** acknowledges those key aspects that impede and escalate challenges students face and pertain to subthemes such as identifiable vulnerable student groups, university support services transparency, university connectedness, and ability to prioritise health.

This analysis highlights how financial buoyancy affects various aspects of student life, from mental and physical health to academic performance, social engagement, and housing security and ultimately empowering tertiary student success.

A major concern among students was maintaining financial buoyancy, with many struggling to afford basic living costs such as rent, utilities, transport, and food. Income sources were often unstable, especially for international students who lacked access to government financial aid. Some students took proactive steps in financial literacy, budgeting, and planning, but others found limited university support services or experienced difficulties navigating them:

So my family will pay the tuition fee for me, and the living cost is just covered by myself. So I do a lot of part time jobs just to support myself. (Participant 1)

I did a lot of like the financial literacy education. I went out and sought that out for myself, because I'm not necessarily like the biggest finance gal ... I went out, and I sought the information for myself, because ... I was like I need to get through this in order to do what I actually want to do ago, I need to have some sort. Sorry. I need to have some sort of plan. (Participant 20)

The impact on well-being was profound, with students reporting increased anxiety, stress, and feelings of isolation. Mental health concerns were often linked to financial struggles, with some students unable to access appropriate healthcare:

It affects you mentally, actually, at least, it make[s] you get you get depressed at certain points, you know, and then, with the level of anxiety, you'll be like, Oh, God! What am I doing? You feel, am I failing? (Participant 26)

Every day I think about money ... I find it hard to sleep. (Participant 56)

Physical health was also affected as students had to choose between nutritious food, study needs, and other essential expenses:

And the financial constraints that prevent students from accessing medical care, waiting [longer] for routine checkups, medical health supports or treatment for illness, and also exacerbating health problems. (Participant 32)

I cannot actually afford the gym ... it's affecting me. (Participant 47)

The pressure to work while studying led to compromised academic success, as students missed lectures or struggled with coursework due to employment commitments:

I haven't gone into debt. I'm very careful about that. But yeah, there's definitely been times where I feel like I've had to either skip lectures or skip tutorials within the bounds of knowing that I can only miss so many because we have tutorial attendance requirements. (Participant 33)

University-related costs, such as textbooks, placements, and materials, further exacerbated financial burdens. Unpaid internships and rigid course structures limited students' ability to work, leading some to consider quitting their studies:

Medical insurance, because when you're international [student] you need ... medical insurance. But the problem is that when you take a temporary graduate visa, you need to have a specific cover that is called overseas students health cover ... So the choice would be either a, pay an exorbitant amount of money, aka \$430 a month ... or ... and we have absolutely nothing. (Participant 63)

I've had to make difficult, difficult decisions ... such as choosing between maybe buying a textbook or paying for food and sacrificing social activities just to save money. (Participant 27)

Additionally, many students lacked a strong sense of belonging in their university community due to financial university disruptions and social barriers:

I believe my situation has affected me ... my sense of belonging in the university community making me feel like I kind of don't fit in or can't or can't fully participate in the activities going on. (Participant 27)

[As a PhD student with Professor's job under threat] My past experience of the with ... XXX I just think ... I feel I'm not part of this uni anymore. (Participant 1)

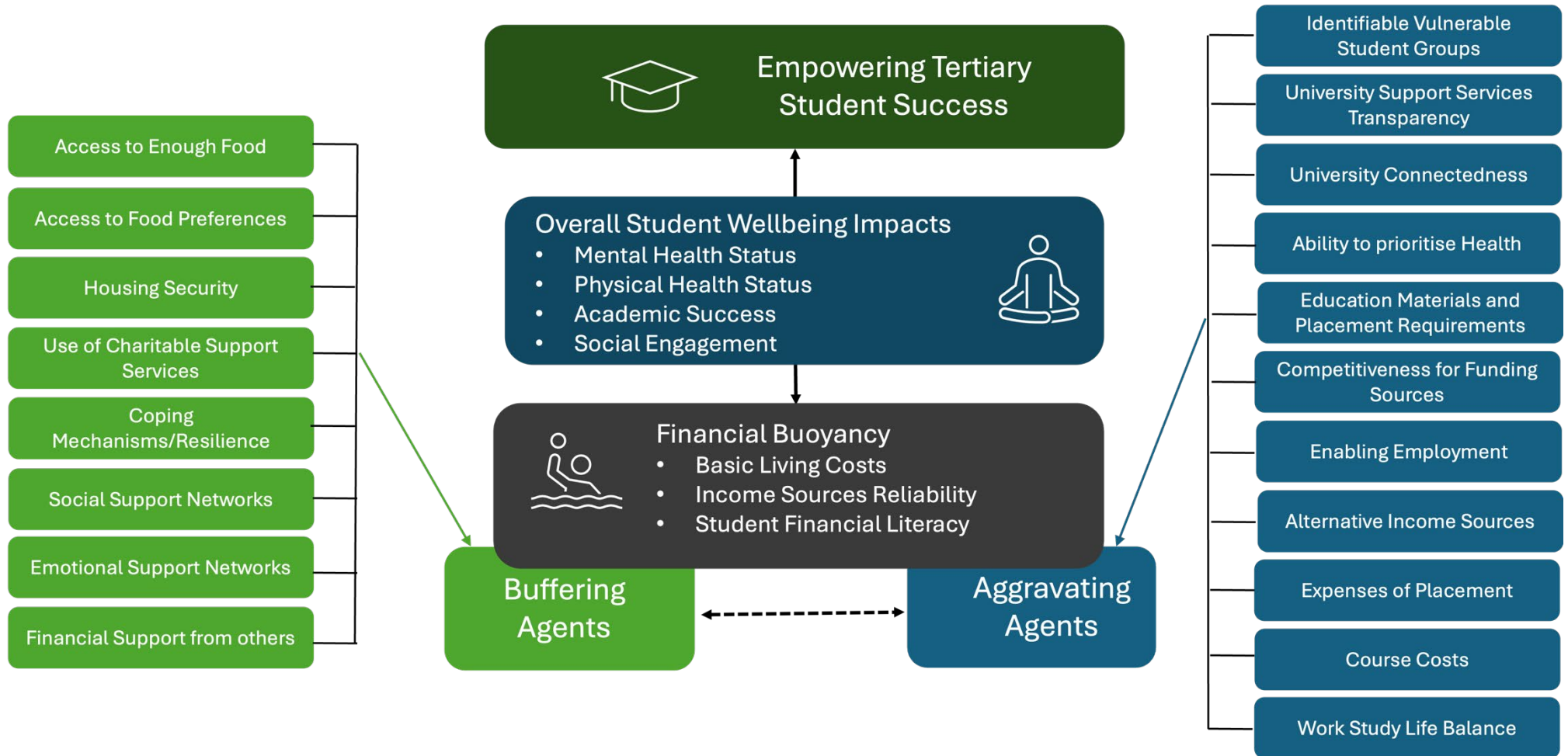
To cope, students adopted various strategies, including strict budgeting, seeking social and emotional support, and using charitable services like food pantries. While some students had financial backing from family, others faced ongoing hardships with no external support.

Table 3: Summary of key themes and subthemes of student financial challenges and well-being impacts

| Theme | Subtheme | Description | Key quotes |
|--|--|--|---|
| Overall student wellbeing impacts | Mental health status | Students experienced stress, anxiety, depression, and guilt due to study pressures, financial struggles, and workload. Limited access to mental health services was noted. | "It affects you mentally ... you get depressed at certain points." (Participant 26) |
| | Physical health status | Study and financial struggles impacted students' ability to maintain physical health, including exercise, nutritious food, and access to healthcare. | "I cannot actually afford the gym ... it's affecting me." (Participant 47) |
| | Academic success | Financial constraints forced students to prioritise work over studies, leading to missed lectures and decreased academic performance. | "There are times when you have to skip lectures ... because you have to work." (Participant 26) |
| | Social engagement | Financial stress limited students' ability to socialise, leading to isolation and loneliness. | "I had to quit social gatherings just to save costs." (Participant 35) |
| Financial buoyancy | Basic living costs adequacy | Many students struggled to cover daily expenses, such as rent, transport, and utilities, without external financial support. | "I have to work part-time just to support myself." (Participant 1) |
| | Income sources eligibility | Students relied on multiple and unstable income sources, particularly international students with limited financial support. | "Every day I think about money ... I find it hard to sleep." (Participant 56) |
| | Student financial literacy | Budgeting and financial planning were necessary skills, with some students actively seeking financial education and university services. | "I closely budget my expenses and prioritise necessities." (Participant 30) |
| Aggravating agents | Identifiable vulnerable student groups | International students, students living with disabilities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds faced additional financial hardships. | "International students don't get enough attention." (Participant 1) |
| | University support services transparency | Some students found university support helpful, while others struggled with lack of awareness and complex processes. | "I wasn't aware of available services until much later." (Participant 65) |
| | University connectedness | Some students felt isolated from the university community due to financial and study pressures. | "I feel like I don't fit in or fully participate." (Participant 27) |
| | Ability to prioritise health | Many students had to choose between healthcare, food, and study-related expenses, leading to poorer health. | "I had to extend my PhD deadline due to an accident." (Participant 18) |
| Course structure and study costs | Education materials and placement requirements | The cost of materials, uniforms, and travel for placements added financial strain. | "I had to choose between buying a textbook or food." (Participant 27) |

| Theme | Subtheme | Description | Key quotes |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| | Competitiveness for funding sources | Some students were ineligible for scholarships or faced competition from more experienced applicants. | "I cannot compete for scholarships because I have no publications." (Participant 1) |
| | Course cost | Lack of transparency in course costs led to financial difficulties for students. | "If you buy a house, you know the cost. Why not for a degree?" (Participant 65) |
| | Expenses of placement | Unpaid internships and placements increased financial burdens, sometimes requiring students to take time off work. | "I almost quit because I didn't know how to pay for placement." (Participant 58) |
| Work-study-life balance | Access to enough food | Many students faced food insecurity, affecting their nutrition and overall health. | "I skip meals to save money for bills." (Participant 17) |
| | Access to food preferences | Financial constraints limited students' ability to buy nutritious or culturally preferred food. | "I ate only chicken, eggs, and broccoli for seven months." (Participant 63) |
| | Housing security | High rent and housing instability were major concerns, especially for international students. | "The cost of living in Melbourne takes up most of my budget." (Participant 28) |
| | Use of charitable support services | Some students relied on food pantries and community support to supplement basic needs. | "The food pantry helped a lot." (Participant 64) |
| Buffering agents | Coping mechanisms | Students used budgeting, strict spending, and part-time work to manage financial stress. | "I track every expense and plan meals carefully." (Participant 20) |
| | Social support networks | Support from family, friends, and peers was crucial in helping students cope with financial and academic pressures. | "My senior friends gave me shelter in bad days." (Participant 7) |
| | Emotional support networks | Some students lacked emotional support, leading to feelings of isolation and stress. | "I felt emotionally broken with no peers around me." (Participant 7) |
| | Financial support from others | Some students received financial help from family, but this was not sustainable long-term. | "My parents cover tuition, but I have to earn for living expenses." (Participant 1) |

Figure 2: Impact of financial burden on tertiary academic outcomes—students' perspectives



6.9 University staff perspectives

Insights from the staff survey ($n = 77$) further highlight the financial challenges faced by students. More than half (55.6%) of the respondents worked in student support departments, with a considerable proportion working within the Medicine and Health Sciences (37.8%) and the Division of Student Life (25.7%). Key findings from the survey are as follows.

6.9.1 Perception of student financial distress

- A significant majority of students are perceived by university staff as either just getting by (44.6%) or struggling financially (39.3%).
- Most staff (72%) reported that financial challenges have reportedly worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.9.2 Student groups most in need of financial support

- Staff identified that the most financially vulnerable students include those living away from home (67.6%), students from lower SES backgrounds (50.0%), and those living with mental health concerns (45.6%).

6.9.3 Common financial struggles

- Staff report that when supporting students, rent and housing costs (75.0%) and food insecurity (70.6%) are the most frequently cited financial struggles among students.
- Staff report that students often cope by skipping meals (55.9%), reducing their academic loads (58.8%), and forgoing medical treatment (51.5%).
- Staff perceived that many students experiencing financial distress rely on shared living arrangements, with 71.6% living with friends or housemates to manage costs.
- Staff report that the primary sources of financial support for these students include government student aid (59.5%) and part-time work (68.9%).

6.9.4 University support mechanisms

- The university offers various financial support options, with food vouchers (39.2%) and an on-campus food bank/pantry (48.6%) being the most common resources.
- Awareness of student financial distress among university staff is moderate, with 43.8% rating their awareness as good.
- However, opinions on the university's leadership in addressing financial challenges are mixed, with 32.5% rating overall support as poor/very poor, alongside 42.5% reporting poor/very poor executive interest and 47.5% poor/very poor executive action, despite stronger faculty-level engagement.
- While multiple support systems exist, nearly half of the staff (48.9%) believe there is no specific, coordinated approach to addressing student poverty, highlighting the need for more strategic and structured interventions.

6.9.5 Qualitative findings: Staff perspectives

Five university staff members participated in a semi-structured interview and highlighted the severe financial struggles faced by students and their impact on wellbeing, academic performance, and access to university support. Staff interviewed worked at the University of

New South Wales, Griffith University, and Edith Cowan University. Due to the small number of participants from some institutions, individual counts are not reported to maintain confidentiality. From the inductive analysis from the findings, five key themes emerged as outlined below:

Theme 1: Key financial challenges

Students are experiencing rising rent, transport costs, and unpaid placements, making it difficult to sustain themselves while studying. One participant noted, "Students face high financial strain due to high rents, even for small, one-bedroom student accommodation" (Staff participant 1).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also worsened financial instability, with one staff member commenting, "When the pandemic was happening, there was a real sense that we're all in this together ... But now, their lifestyle isn't improving—it's getting harder and harder to meet expenses" (Staff participant 3).

Theme 2: At-risk student groups

Certain student groups face heightened vulnerability, including international students, single parents, and students escaping domestic violence. One case involved an international student who became homeless: "The student was couch surfing at the beginning and then living on campus in the main library. They also lived in a train station and a bus stop" (Staff participant 5).

Single parents are also struggling: "I had one student who said, I do a shift from 11pm till 7am, take my kids to school, then turn up for class at 9am" (Staff participant 3).

Theme 3: Impact on wellbeing and academic performance

Financial hardship has led to homelessness, food insecurity, and mental health deterioration. One staff member observed, "We have midwifery students sleeping in their cars while studying" (Staff participant 2).

Another participant added, "I'm seeing more students with dark circles under their eyes, getting thinner ... it worries me that they're skipping meals" (Staff participant 3).

Theme 4: University support systems and barriers

Universities provide emergency aid, financial literacy training, and partnerships with community organisations. Some institutions offer food vouchers, rent assistance, and prepaid transport cards. One staff member noted, "The way our scholarship team operates is amazing. They can provide emergency bursaries very quickly—up to \$1,000" (Staff participant 2).

However, barriers such as shame, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic delays prevent students from seeking help: "Some students don't engage because they want to try and work through it on their own" (Staff participant 1).

Theme 5: Recommendations for improvement

Staff emphasised greater flexibility in study modes, better communication about available support, and a holistic, community-driven approach. One academic stressed, "We need to

stop saying that study should be students' number one priority. These students are trying to put food on the table and advance their education" (Staff participant 3).

The findings from the staff interviews emphasise the urgent need for improved financial support for students. Universities must streamline financial aid processes, increase awareness campaigns, and ensure equitable access to support services. In addition, financial aid should be structured to provide ongoing, sustainable support rather than one-time emergency relief. Policies that integrate financial literacy education, work-study opportunities, and targeted support for vulnerable student populations will play a crucial role in reducing financial stress and improving student outcomes.

Finally, it is noteworthy that findings from the scoping review resonate with the findings of the other studies conducted as part of this review. The scoping review suggested that financial stress continues to be experienced by Australian/New Zealand university students with some studies indicating that over half (range of 8–68%) of students face significant financial issues and 96% of students report high emotional stress. Additionally, the scoping review noted that some groups are more vulnerable than others—for example, students from low SES backgrounds and international students—and have increased vulnerability due to factors such as inadequate financial support and limited access to job opportunities and support services. Support services available for students included emergency grants, food pantries (including international students), and community gardens but with limited impact in addressing underlying financial hardships.

The next section provides policy recommendations based on these findings, outlining concrete steps universities and policymakers can take to create a more financially inclusive higher education system.

7. Discussion

This study investigated the financial challenges faced by students at Australian universities amid a period of high and sustained inflation. It also examined the impact of financial insecurity on perceived academic performance, wellbeing, and food security, alongside assessing students' awareness and utilisation of support services. What was consistent in this investigation were the key issues noted similarly in every study conducted in this review around financial hardship. What is emphasised is that financial hardships are increasingly creating hurdles for students to complete and enjoy tertiary studies in a healthy way to enable optimal successful academic outcomes. A key finding was that 32% of students reported financial inadequacy, with international students, Indigenous students, students living with a disability, and those living alone being disproportionately affected. Housing costs, tuition fees, and food insecurity emerged as the most pressing financial concerns. Despite the availability of university financial support services, only one in five students were aware of them, and uptake remained notably low. Using Antonovsky's salutogenic model (Antonovsky, 1996), this discussion explores how financial insecurity and resource access influence students' ability to navigate the "river" of university life. Antonovsky's salutogenic perspective emphasises the resources - both individual knowledge and skills and the broader social, cultural and structural conditions - that enable health and wellbeing (McCuaig and Mikael, 2018). When applied to university students' experiences of financial insecurity, this perspective highlights that financial stress is shaped by wider socio-cultural contexts rather than individual capabilities alone. Our examination therefore focusses on examining students' skills and access to resources while also highlighting the systemic conditions that heighten the risks and impacts of financial insecurity.

7.1 Financial insecurity and its academic and wellbeing implications

Financial insecurity among university students has been extensively documented in Australian and international literature, often linking it to adverse academic and wellbeing outcomes (Maharaj et al., 2024; Universities Australia, 2022). Our findings align with this literature but also highlight disruptions to students' sense of coherence—a salutogenic concept that refers to the ability to view the world as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful and helps move them towards better health outcomes (Antonovsky, 1996). Previous national surveys indicate that more than 20% of students experience moderate to severe financial stress, with many contemplating leaving their studies due to financial strain (Universities Australia, 2018, 2022). Our finding that close to one-third of students struggle financially aligns with this literature but actually presents a higher prevalence than previous studies. This discrepancy may stem from differences in economic conditions at the time of data collection, variations in institutional social support, or methodological differences in survey design and sampling.

Food insecurity is a particularly severe consequence of financial stress, affecting over half of the surveyed students. Those in financial distress were found to be 11 times more likely to

experience food insecurity than their financially stable counterparts (see Table 4). This aligns with previous research linking financial hardship to reduced dietary quality, irregular meals, and reliance on food banks (Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Shi et al., 2021). The impact of financial insecurity extends beyond nutrition, impairing students' ability to learn effectively. Prior research suggests that financial stress, long working hours, and poor nutrition negatively impact cognitive function and academic performance (Van Woerden et al., 2019). These findings indicate that students must not only contend with the logistics of financing their education but also maintain confidence in their capacity to manage these challenges effectively.

Table 4: Consequences associated with financial insecurity among students

| | Odds Ratio (OR) (95% CI) | p-value | Notes |
|---|--------------------------|---------|--|
| Negative academic impact | 5.48 (3.93–7.64) | <0.001 | Students with inadequate finances have over 5 times higher odds of experiencing negative academic impacts. |
| Food insecurity | 11.28 (6.60–19.26) | <0.001 | Students with inadequate finances are about 11 times more likely to be food insecure. |
| Lack of awareness of support systems | 1.53 (1.08–2.18) | <0.001 | Students with inadequate finances have 1.53 times higher odds of not knowing about available support services. |
| Dissatisfaction with university support services | 2.96 (2.10–4.10) | <0.001 | Students with inadequate finances are about 3 times more likely to report dissatisfaction with university support. |

7.2 Patterns of support provision and institutional response

The desktop audit of Australian universities revealed inconsistencies in the availability and accessibility of financial support services. While nearly all institutions provided some form of financial aid, the range and clarity of services varied significantly. Institutions such as Charles Darwin University and Charles Sturt University stood out for offering holistic support services that addressed both immediate financial crises and long-term financial planning. However, a gap between policy and practice was evident, with only a small proportion of universities having formal financial inclusion plans despite offering financial grants.

Australian federal policies mandate financial support services for students, particularly international students, under the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Compliance – Standard 6 (Department of Education, 2022). Additionally, the Support for

Students Policy requires universities to communicate available financial support options (Department of Education, 2024). Despite these legal obligations, many university staff remain unaware of financial inclusion policies, and students struggle to access clear information about available resources. Poor webpage design and a lack of comprehensive financial aid information further hinder students navigating their options effectively.

7.3 Resilience and coping strategies

Despite significant financial challenges, students demonstrated resilience in navigating financial insecurity. Many adopted multiple roles to manage their finances while maintaining full-time academic commitments, underscoring their strong dedication to education. This resilience aligns with Antonovsky's salutogenic model (Antonovsky, 1996), which emphasises individuals' ability to perceive their challenges as understandable, manageable, and meaningful. However, the low uptake of university financial support services suggests that many students rely on personal coping mechanisms rather than institutional aid (Brock, 2010). Enhancing students' ability to navigate financial stress requires interventions that are accessible, well communicated, and effectively targeted at high-risk groups.

7.4 Addressing financial hardship: Multi-level interventions

Given the widespread financial difficulties faced by students, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2000) which encompasses how a person's development is shaped by different layers of their environment. This can be envisaged as a set of nested circles with the individual in the centre influenced by the closest to them to the widest society. This model highlights the need for interventions at various levels:

7.4.1 Individual level: Enhancing financial literacy and resilience

Universities should offer targeted financial literacy programs, mental health support, and nutrition education to equip students with essential life skills. Workshops, online modules, and one-on-one financial counselling can improve financial decision-making and reduce stress (Murray et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that our studies have revealed that many students are implementing strict budgeting strategies, so financial literacy efforts need to focus on alternative or additional funding or progress options students might be able to consider in order to complete their studies successfully without excessive stress.

7.4.2 Interpersonal level: Strengthening social support networks

Peer support groups, student-led mentorship programs, and alumni engagement can provide emotional and practical assistance. International students, in particular, benefit from culturally inclusive peer networks that help navigate financial challenges and reduce social isolation (Ke et al., 2023). This will also assist in reducing stigma (perceived or real) about financial challenges that students face, who to follow up with, and how to manage appropriately.

7.4.3 Organisational level: Building a supportive campus infrastructure

Universities should expand scholarships, emergency grants, and affordable on-campus housing. This includes ensuring adequate reserves are in place to manage funds connected to those strategies. Flexible learning options, including hybrid and asynchronous course delivery, can support students in managing work-study commitments (Perna, 2023) and need to be reviewed regularly to see if these approaches are meeting students' needs. Improved visibility and accessibility of financial aid information through streamlined web design and targeted outreach campaigns are also critical. This should include tailored support for vulnerable groups, particularly during especially challenging periods such as mandatory unpaid placements, to ensure they can access the financial assistance they need.

7.4.4 Community level: Collaborative partnerships

Universities can partner with local governments, non-profits, and businesses to expand affordable housing, food assistance, and employment opportunities. Collaborations with community organisations can enhance the effectiveness of support services and ensure students receive comprehensive assistance (Shi & Allman-Farinelli, 2023).

7.4.5 Policy level: Advocating for systemic change

Long-term improvements require stable federal funding, expanded social protections for international students, and affordable healthcare access. Universities should engage in sustained advocacy efforts to ensure student financial challenges remain a policy priority (Men et al., 2024) This needs to include working with professional accrediting bodies to assess placement requirements, and connecting with public expectations around the critical reason for having a richly diverse graduate population to meet community needs into the future.

7.5 Recommendations for improving financial support

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge:

1. **Develop comprehensive financial inclusion plans:** Universities should implement holistic financial support strategies that are clearly defined and communicated to address tuition, housing, food, medical expenses, and emergency aid.
2. **Improve webpage design and accessibility:** Financial aid information should be clearly visible, easy to navigate, centralised, and provide up-to-date details on available services.
3. **Expand emergency support services:** More universities should offer emergency grants and crisis assistance (properly funded) to prevent financial hardship from derailing students' education. Students should be engaged in their development and a needs-based data driven strategy implemented to determine long-term viability.

4. **Enhance non-monetary support services:** Providing discounted textbooks, subsidised meals and food programs, community/campus food gardens, and on-campus services like subsidised GPs can alleviate financial pressures.
5. **Simplify application processes for aid:** Reducing administrative barriers and increasing targeted outreach can improve student engagement with support services. Promotion of support services also needs a multi-platform approach to increase student engagement.

This study underscores the significant financial hardships faced by Australian university students and their impact on academic performance and wellbeing. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The exclusion of non-English language studies and grey literature may have omitted relevant insights into student support services. Additionally, reliance on cross-sectional data restricts the ability to assess the long-term efficacy of interventions. Longitudinal studies that capture changes in student financial insecurity over time are warranted. The variability in study populations in published literature, some focusing solely on undergraduates while others include postgraduates and international students—makes direct comparisons of our study findings challenging. Inconsistencies in measurement tools across studies lead to variations in how financial hardship and food insecurity are defined and assessed across studies and between organisations. Moreover, institutional and policy-level factors were not extensively examined, limiting insights into how government policies and university funding structures influence student financial wellbeing.

What is noteworthy is that while many students exhibit resilience (including sometimes brutal budgeting tactics), there is a pressing need for institutional and policy-level interventions to address financial insecurity more effectively and over the longer term rather than provide “band-aid” type solutions. Longitudinal approaches are required in future research to examine the long-term effects of financial stress on graduates' career outcomes and examine overall student wellbeing. Additionally, studies pilot testing and later evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as expanded scholarships, financial literacy programs, and housing support initiatives, would provide empirical evidence to inform policy decisions. Importantly, these current studies have revealed that financial challenges are escalating, increasing the “turbulence in the river of life” (Antonovsky, 1996) for all students, especially those from vulnerable groups. Addressing these financial challenges is crucial for fostering a supportive and inclusive university environment, enabling student success and ensuring a better future for all Australians. Adopting a holistic, multi-level approach, universities can better support students and foster an inclusive, financially sustainable academic environment.

8. Conclusion

This project provides robust national evidence that financial insecurity is a persistent and structural challenge within Australian higher education, with clear implications for student wellbeing, equity, and retention. The findings highlight substantial variation in the visibility, accessibility, and scope of financial support across universities, resulting in unequal student experiences and outcomes. Such inconsistencies point to gaps not only in institutional practice but also in broader policy settings governing student income support and equity frameworks.

From a policy perspective, the results reinforce the need to recognise student financial wellbeing as a core component of participation and success strategies. Current support mechanisms do not consistently reflect the real cost of study and living, particularly for students balancing employment, caregiving responsibilities, disability, or mandatory unpaid placements. The uneven awareness and utilisation of support services further indicate that policy effectiveness is influenced by institutional implementation and communication practices.

These findings suggest that stronger alignment between government funding settings, institutional equity strategies, and student support frameworks is required to ensure that financial hardship does not undermine educational attainment. Embedding financial wellbeing within national higher education policy agendas, equity performance measures, and institutional accountability processes will be critical to driving more consistent and sustainable responses.

Overall, this project contributes policy-relevant evidence demonstrating that addressing student financial hardship is not solely a welfare issue but a strategic investment in student success, workforce participation, and social mobility within Australia's higher education system.

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10. Appendices

Appendix 10.1: A guide to a financially inclusive university

Improving the Financial Wellbeing of Australian University Students

A guide to a Financially Inclusive University

A Guide to a Financially Inclusive University

This guide for financial inclusion in Australian and New Zealand Universities has been designed for university leaders and practitioners in higher education to shape their institutional responses to how they support financial wellbeing amongst their student population.

This guide has been developed as an output of a national research project, led by researchers at the University of Wollongong and funded by the Australian Centre for Student Equity & Success (ACSES). The study investigated the financial challenges student's face and the effectiveness of financial aid programs and non-monetary support initiatives in Australian and New Zealand universities. This guide has been developed with input from 41 Australian universities, and the lived experiences of over 900 students and staff. University students who participated in this study included both domestic and international students undertaking undergraduate, postgraduate and higher degree courses.

FINANCIAL WELLBEING

Financial wellbeing is defined as having the financial freedom to make choices that allow you to enjoy life.

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Financial hardship is used to describe circumstances where an individual is temporarily unable to meet monetary obligations, such as a loan or debt often due to a loss of employment, illness or other unmitigated circumstance.

FINANCIAL INSECURITY

Financial insecurity is defined as not having the basic goods and services that an individual needs, such as food or shelter, after utilising all of the resources available to them.

FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is defined as whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.

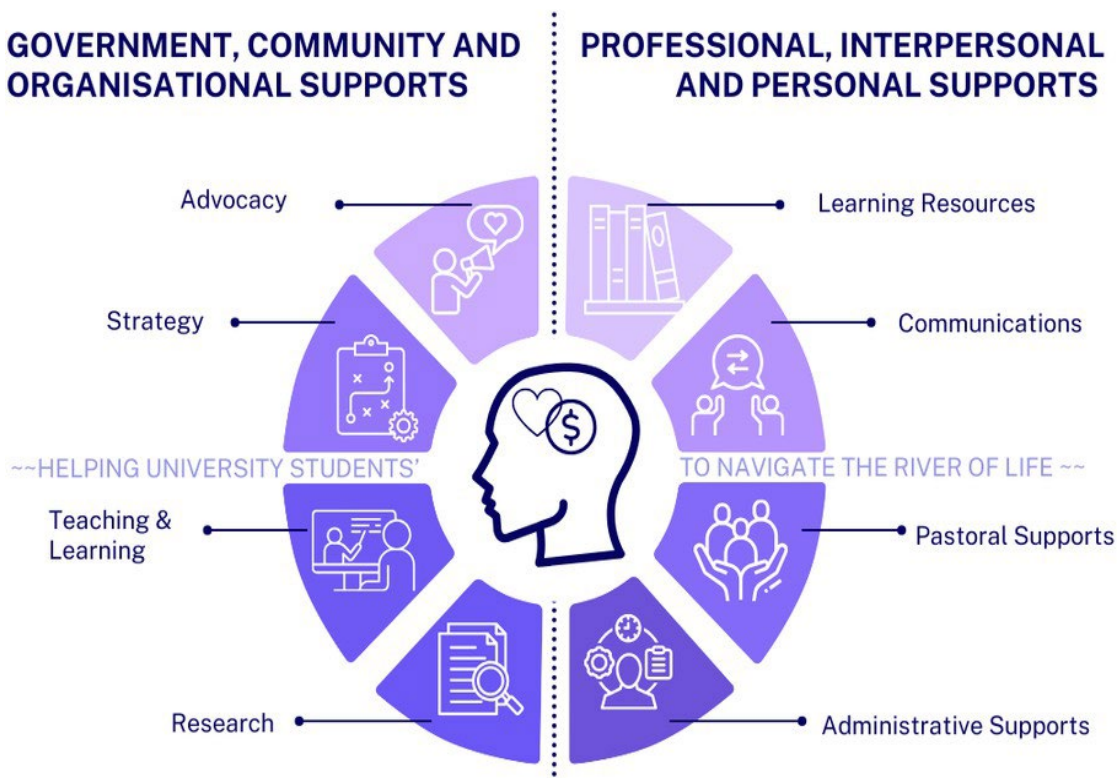
Financial hardship and financial insecurity amongst Australian University Students

Financial hardship is widespread in Australian university settings, with one in three students experiencing financial insecurity. Within the Australian university student population, international students, students living with a disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are disproportionately impacted. Students described skipping meals, not being able to afford nutritious food, and struggling to secure stable and affordable accommodation. For universities, financial hardship is one of the major reasons that students do not continue with their studies, resulting in higher rates of attrition and increased pressure on university support services due to impacts on mental health. Investing in services and initiatives that support student's financial wellbeing, can not only lead to positive outcomes for individual students, but in a constrained higher education system, enable increased student retention, representing a return on investment for Australian universities and a positive long-term contribution to the Australian workforce and economy.

Macro and Micro Approaches to Financial Wellbeing

Universities have an important role in improving the financial wellbeing of their students. This guide provides practical suggestions for universities at all levels of the institution to make a concerted and tangible impact that supports students to have thriving lives. Using Antonovsky's Salutogenic Model (1996), these guidelines, illustrated in the figure below, explore how financial insecurity influences students' ability to navigate the 'river' of university life.

Figure 1: Applying Antonovsky's Salutogenic Model to developing a Financially Inclusive University



Macro - System Wide Changes to Support Students Financial Wellbeing

The following are **macro**, system wide changes, that could be undertaken that could make sustained, systematic impacts to improving student's financial wellbeing. This includes government, community and organisational supports.



Universities have a collective voice to lobby Federal Governments and Professional Bodies to address the underlying causes of financial distress for the university student population. This could include advocating for:

1. Enhancing government funded payment schemes, such as Youth Allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY to reflect the actual financial needs of Australian university students.
2. The reduction of HECS-HELP debt students in fields of workplace shortage, at both a Federal and State level.
3. Expanding placement payments to be more inclusive of students in a wide range of disciplines. In addition to this, ensuring the proactive awarding of placement funding to mitigate the financial burden on the student.
4. Enhancing public transport and housing support, with consideration given to equitable approaches for international students.
5. Reimagining basic skill and knowledge for graduates and alternative experiential learning to demonstrate skills to revisit placement requirements, together with professional bodies.
6. Strategic communications around the critical nature of a diverse and supported student community for the future of Australia.

Strategy

Financial inclusion needs to be driven across the entire University. A number of universities have taken a strategic approach to improving student's financial wellbeing which has included:



1. Developing a university-wide Financial Inclusion Plan.
2. Financial wellbeing is considered in student-focused policies and procedures.
3. Identifying an Executive Champion or Sponsor.
4. Establishing a senior financial inclusion taskforce or reference group to guide the university's response and investment, with the student voice at the forefront of these internal conversations.
5. Establishing an institution-wide 'Student Success' fund, utilising institutional and philanthropic funds for financial support initiatives.
6. Consulting with students, to determine the relevant actions based on the needs of students within your institution.
7. Program logics, together with evaluation plans are in place to measure the impact and effectiveness of financial supports.



Teaching and Learning

There are examples of Australian universities, who have demonstrated a deep understanding of their student cohort. This has resulted in changes to teaching and learning to enable students to better manage their university studies, together with work, family and caring responsibilities. Examples include:

1. 'Block' or trimester-based models that increase student's capacity to engage in paid work and university study concurrently.
2. Flexible modes of delivery for teaching and learning to enable students to balance work and personal commitments.
3. Prioritised tutorial enrolment for students with significant caring responsibilities.
4. Automated extensions for assessments.
5. Focussed experiential learning to include real-world scenarios.
6. Embedding financial and food literacy into curriculum.

Research



Bringing together research and practice, can support an evidence-based approach to financial wellbeing. Examples have included:

1. Professional student support services, partnering with research teams in schools to take an evidenced informed approach to addressing the financial wellbeing and food insecurity challenges experienced by students.
2. Opportunities for trials and evaluations to demonstrate the impact of financial wellbeing initiatives.
3. Designing evidence-informed interventions and the ability to share best practice across the sector and inform future policy settings.
4. Creation of paid opportunities for research students.

Micro - Individual student supports that improve Financial Wellbeing

The following are **micro supports**, that could be put into place that could collectively make a substantial impact to improving student's financial wellbeing at your university. This includes personal, interpersonal and professional supports.



Learning Resources

Learning Resources, typically overseen by University Libraries have a key role to play in supporting the financial wellbeing of university students. Examples of initiatives University Libraries have put into place across Australian Universities includes:

1. Digital first approach to mandatory and recommended readings, reducing the need to purchase textbooks.
2. Providing 24-hour access to safe study spaces for students.
3. Technology loans, such as laptops, calculators and software, including assistive technology.
4. Removing fines and waiving lost item replacement costs for students experiencing financial hardship.
5. Subject resources and required texts are available to access from the library for students who do not have the means to purchase subject-related materials.

Communications

Current student communication teams have a key role in raising the awareness of financial supports available to current students. Examples of good practice across Australian universities includes:



1. Developing a centralised web presence for financial supports available for students. In addition to this, where students should go to see financial support should be clearly communicated.
2. Increasing awareness of financial support services through multiple channels including email, social media and student portals.
3. Reducing the stigma around seeking financial aid, to normalise help seeking behaviour and encourage use of financial supports.
4. Financial supports and tips for financial wellbeing integrated into university knowledge bases.
5. Feedback loops offered to students to proactively provide feedback and input into future campaigns.



Student Support

University support services, including Student Guilds, are central to the provision of financial support services for university students. Examples of good practice included:

1. Partnering with community organisations and student bodies to provide food security programs, such as Community Gardens; Food Banks; Breakfast Programs and Subsidised Meal Plans.
2. Increasing access to food vouchers, emergency grants, short-term loans and crisis funding, with fast-track application processes for students in need.
3. Proactive, targeted grants for at-risk student groups, with minimal application processes.
4. Dedicated financial counselling services and tax clinics available to students on campus, at no cost.
5. Dedicated Student Financial Support and Housing Support Officers. as a central contact point for students to receive housing advice and support, as well as financial products such as interest free loans.
6. On-campus employment and paid internships.
7. Financial literacy workshops and online financial literacy programs, integrated into orientation and across the student lifecycle, with proactive technology-based solutions that can identify students at-risk of financial insecurity.
8. Providing emergency and ongoing support to students who are victims of gender-based violence.
9. Providing access to free period products on campus.
10. Offering programs that develop student's food literacy, through activities such as free cooking classes and budgeting workshops.
11. Delivering peer support and mentoring programs, to enable students to share tips and advice regarding financial wellbeing.

Administrative Supports



Administrative teams across the University, can make substantial impacts to improve the financial wellbeing of university students. Examples of best practice that have been identified across Australian Universities include:

1. Embedding 'low-cost nutritious meals' into the lease agreements of food outlets on campus.
2. Reviewing institutional approaches to scholarships, improving and simplifying application processes.
3. Upskilling staff across the university to identify and triage to appropriate supports for students experiencing financial vulnerability.
4. Development of a Student Accommodation and Housing Plan that provides a range of affordable and emergency accommodation options for students.

This guide was produced as part of an Australian Centre for Student Equity & Success (ACSES) funded project, titled “Toward a Financially Inclusive Higher Education System”.

This project aimed to understand the financial challenges experience by Australian University students and the effectiveness of financial support programs available to them.

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Appendix 10.2: A guide to a financially inclusive university—poster






FINANCIAL WELLBEING AT UNIVERSITY

HELPING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS* TO NAVIGATE THE RIVER OF LIFE

ADVOCACY

- Enhancing government funded schemes to reflect financial needs of university students.
- Lobby government to reduce HECS-HELP debt for areas of workplace shortage.
- Expand placement payments and subsidies to students in wider range of disciplines.
- State based support for professions of need.
- Public transport and housing support with equity for international students.
- Revise base standard skills, hours and knowledge required by professional bodies.
- Communication around critical need of diverse and supported student community for future of Australia

LEARNING RESOURCES

- Digital first approach to mandatory and recommended readings.
- 24-hour access to safe study spaces.
- Technology loans including assistive technology.
- Waive lost item replacement costs for students experiencing financial hardship.
- Subject resources available from the library for students who do not have means to purchase.

STRATEGY

- Develop university-wide financial inclusion plan.
- Financial wellbeing in policies and procedures.
- Identify executive champion or sponsor.
- Senior financial inclusion task force to guide response and investment with student voice at forefront.
- Establish 'Student Success' fund, through philanthropic funding opportunities.
- Consulting with students, for actions based on need.
- Embed data-driven decision making to ensure support services meet goals.
- Program logics to measure impact and effectiveness.

COMMUNICATIONS

- Centralised web presence with dedicated contacts for financial supports for students.
- Increase awareness of financial supports through multiple channels.
- Normalise help seeking behaviour to encourage use of financial supports.
- Supports and tips for financial wellbeing and food security integrated into knowledge bases.
- Feedback mechanisms for university campaigns.
- Regular awareness and communication campaigns.

TEACHING & LEARNING

- 'Block' or trimester models to increase student capacity to work and study concurrently.
- Utilise flexible modes of teaching delivery.
- Prioritised tutorial enrolment for students with caring responsibilities.
- Automated assessment extensions.
- Focussed experiential learning to include real-world scenarios.
- Embedding financial and food literacy into curriculum.

STUDENT SUPPORT

- Partner with organisations for food security programs - community gardens, shared meals.
- Access to fast tracked emergency grants, food vouchers, short-term loans, crisis funding.
- Targeted grants for at-risk student groups.
- Dedicated support officers as central contact for student housing and financial advice.
- On-campus employment and paid internships.
- Financial literacy workshops and programs integrated across student lifecycle.
- Emergency and ongoing support to student victims of gender-based violence.
- Providing free period products on campus.
- Offering food literacy programs, cooking classes.
- Peer-mentoring and wellbeing programs.
- Facilitate pre-paid transport and food vouchers.
- One-on-one financial counselling sessions.

RESEARCH

- Partnerships between research teams and student support teams to build the evidence base for financial wellbeing and food security programs.
- Trial and evaluate financial wellbeing initiatives.
- Design evidence-informed interventions to share best practice in sector and inform policy change.
- Create paid opportunities for research students.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

- Embed 'low-cost nutritious meals' in lease agreements of food outlets on campus.
- Review and simplify approaches to scholarships.
- Upskill staff to identify and triage student financial vulnerability and safety.
- Develop accommodation and housing plans for affordable and emergency accommodation.

GOVERNMENT - COMMUNITY - ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORTS

PROFESSIONAL - INTERPERSONAL - PERSONAL SUPPORTS

FRAMED BY THE SALUTOGENIC MODEL FOR HEALTH
Source: Antonovsky, A. Health Promot Int, 1996. 11: p. 11-18. * University students include both domestic and international students undertaking undergraduate, postgraduate and higher degree courses.

Appendix 10.3: Qualtrics survey for the desktop audit

Survey Flow

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q12 This survey is part of desktop audit designed to collect information around financial support for students attending Australian Universities. Please complete the following questions for each University as you would if you were a student seeking this information around financial support and services.

Q1 University name

Q2 University main webpage

Q12 Is there a clear and accessible financial inclusion plan/policy/strategy for students?

- yes - you will be guided to two additional questions (1)
 - No (2)
-

Display this question:

If Is there a clear and accessible financial inclusion plan/policy/strategy for students? = yes - you will guided to two additional questions

Q13 What does this include?

Display this question:

If If What does this include? Text Response Is Displayed

Q14 Provide webpage (copy and paste)

Q15 Is there an accessible dedicated webpage for financial support for students?

- Yes, copy and paste webpage below (1)

- No (2)

Q17 What kinds of financial support advice are provided? Please tick all that apply

- i. On-campus and off-campus housing assistance (1)
 - ii. On-campus and off-campus job finding assistance (2)
 - iii. Fees assistance (3)
 - iv. Scholarships (4)
 - v. Laptop loan schemes (5)
 - vi. Free Stationery (6)
 - vii. Access to free professional clothing (7)
 - viii. Emergency financial support (8)
 - ix. Food provision, if ticked, what does this look like e.g. food pantry, vouchers, free breakfast, free meals, community garden, cooking classes, other (please add below) (9)

 - x. Other (please add below) (10) _____
-

Q9 What form is financial advice being provided at this university? Please tick all that apply

- a. Student support advisers (1)
 - b. Financial counsellors (2)
 - c. Building financial capability (e.g. Online resources such as budget planners) (3)
 - 24hr support wellbeing phone line (4)
 - d. Building legal awareness (e.g. understanding rental contracts requirements or employment rights) (5)
 - e. Provision of financial workshops/seminars (6)
 - f. Links to external financial helplines (e.g. government or non-government) (7)
 - Other (please add below) (8) _____
-

Q7 Are there any financial grants available for students?

- Yes, please add below (1) _____
- No (2)

Q18 Provide details below of any specific initiatives that the university provides to assist students financially (e.g. awareness building around financial risk and developing resilience, or skill development such as budgeting workshops). Please list any relevant initiatives found and copy and paste any relevant webpage links.

Q19 5. What broader student support services or products does the university provide? Please tick all that apply

- a. 24 student wellbeing phone line (1)
- b. University counselling services (2)
- c. Student services support, please add below what type, such as Front desk, Hotline (phone or email), FAQs/knowledge base search facility (please add below the type) (3)

- d. Student welfare programs (4)
- e. Student scholarships, bursaries and grants (5)
- f. Other, eg. Textbook support, health or dental support (please add below) (6)

Q8 Please note down below any other initiatives/programmes/plans/services that the university has implemented to address financial hardship, financial vulnerability or student poverty not yet identified.

Q3 Please rate the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being extremely difficult; 5 being extremely easy)

| Extremely difficult | Somewhat difficult | Neither easy nor difficult | Somewhat easy | Extremely easy |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

How easy was it to locate information about financial support ()



Q18 Please rate the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being extremely difficult; 5 being extremely easy)

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|--|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Extrem ely difficult | Somew hat difficult | Neithe r easy nor difficul t | Somew hat easy | Extrem ely easy |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Now thinking as a prospective student how confident would you be about coming to this University and being able to find financial support if you needed it? ()



Q17 Please rate the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being extremely difficult; 5 being extremely easy)

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|--|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Extrem ely difficult | Somew hat difficult | Neithe r easy nor difficul t | Somew hat easy | Extrem ely easy |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Now thinking as a current student who is in a vulnerable financial position how confident would you be that this University could support you through financial hardship if you needed help? ()



Q11 Please feel free to provide any additional comments on your observations around this University approach to supporting students around financial matters, or any other key thoughts around how this University relates to their current and prospective students. Please feel free to text add here.

Appendix 10.4: Key themes and subthemes of student financial challenges and well-being impacts (Qualitative findings full table)

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Overall student wellbeing impacts | Students outlined the multi-faceted impacts of study on their quality of life and articulated a decrease in quality of life while on placement, grouped into four subthemes clarified below. | “I just need something like that where you bring everyone together. So it's not international students over there doing this and that particular group of students over there doing that. And everyone's siloed off. It's everyone together, and it's a collective care situation where we're making sure that everyone gets cared for in a collective way.” (Participant 65) |
| Mental health status | <p>The experience of study was affecting the mental health status of university students including feelings of helplessness and shame. Participants experienced some symptoms of stress or anxiety during their studies. This was often attributed either directly to financial status or associated with contributing factors such as employment, expenses of placement, or course structure.</p> <p>The mental health impacts of study also further impacted overall wellbeing, causing cascading social, academic, and physical health impacts for students. Issues noted include the financial constraints of study as a barrier to accessing appropriate mental health care, and university to provide support and resources to mitigate mental health concerns.</p> | <p>“And I'm coming from a very low income background. I have some financial stress and constant(ly as) part of my life to (be)afford my studies.” (Participant 17)</p> <p>“It affects you mentally, actually, at least, it make you get you get depressed at certain points, you know, and then, with the level of anxiety, you'll be like, Oh, God! What am I doing? You feel, am I failing?” (Participant 26)</p> <p>“Emotional to financial stress ... I feel anxious. I'm worried about my financial situation, which can actually be overwhelming.” (Participant 27)</p> <p>“When I am unable to afford necessary items, or you know, experience, I think it creates so a profound sense of frustration and helplessness for me.” (Participant 28)</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|------------------------|---|--|
| | | <p>"I often feel anxious and worried about my financial situation a lot which can be overwhelming and irritating." (Participant 30)</p> <p>"It's definitely hard, like it does create further isolation ... you struggle to focus on your work, and you struggle mentally to find like. Sometimes you can get like a bit depressed because you're like, I don't have any meaning, because there's no people in my life like, what's the point? Why am I doing this degree?" (Participant 31)</p> <p>"I feel a lot of guilt for being 43 and still studying and not just going into a job that would pay the bills." (Participant 56)</p> <p>"Everything is like monetary now, I guess, and that is not necessarily like (its not) anyone else's fault, like I have done that to myself. But I guess it's thinking about the future so much constantly makes you not live in the moment and makes you think I can't do this today because I need to save money for the future." (Participant 58)</p> <p>"I used to push(ing) through because that is the only solution I have ... because I don't have any supporter, I'm going to assist me." (Participant 62)</p> |
| Physical health status | The effects of study and competing financial priorities impacted adversely on the physical health status of students. Additionally, students reported that they struggled to prioritise their health during study, noting that they were often unable to maintain | "And the financial constraints that prevent students from accessing medical care, waiting (longer) for routine checkups, medical health supports or treatment for illness, and also exacerbating health problems." (Participant 32) |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|------------------|--|--|
| | <p>exercise regimens or needed to choose between competing financial priorities such as nutritious food or access to healthcare. Participants found both time and finance to be a barrier to accessing suitable healthcare while studying and reflected on the impact of this on their physical health.</p> | <p>"...back in my country I used to go into the gym and go mountain climbing ... but I cannot actually afford gym. So basically, that's how it's gonna it's affecting me right now." (Participant 47)</p> |
| Academic success | <p>The effects of study on academic performance and balancing work to meet commitments impacts university assessments or performance on study itself was also noted by participants.</p> <p>Students described how academic performance and financial pressures affected their ability to perform at their best both during study periods and in university assessments.</p> | <p>"There are times when you have to skip lectures. and (then to) attend your work ... (you have to) mix your work and then attend to lectures ..You are kind of having issues with your employer, your employer, you know, and then you are kind of having issues with the lecturers or missing classes, and then you, on your own part, as a student you are missing what is being taught, and then you are lost. These are challenges we face because you have to work in order to, you know." (Participant 26)</p> <p>"I want to work part time job, which I did which really ... (but it) was really interfering with my study." (Participant 32)</p> <p>"I haven't gone into debt. I'm very careful about that. But yeah, there's definitely been times where I feel like I've had to either skip lectures or skip tutorials within the bounds of knowing that I can only miss so many because we have tutorial attendance requirements for." (Participant 33)</p> <p>"I have to work. Sometimes, like after class, I have to go to work and work. Sometimes I don't go to classes because of my work." (Participant 62)</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Social engagement | <p>Students note the effects of study on social connections and time spent socially.</p> <p>Students experienced impacts on their ability to connect with family and friends during their studies. Barriers identified by students were time and energy, with intersections between employment status and time spent socially. Students also reflected on the absence of meaningful social time financial stress and the further impact on their mental health and ability to cope.</p> | <p>"I try to be very careful, even with the kind of friends I keep ... not (be with) friends that will kind of lure me into unnecessary expenses." (Participant 17)</p> <p>"Building social connection and networks, you know, without money, you know ... you cannot build social, you know, social relation(s), and then connection." (Participant 26)</p> <p>"Budgeting constraints, you know, often limits my ability to participate in social activities with our friends and also going to events on campuses." (Participant 28)</p> <p>"I've had to put an end to some of my social gatherings just because I wasn't financial. Okay, to go ahead with the." (Participant 30)</p> <p>"I encountered this social isolation. So this actually relates to my social withdrawal (from) other students ... so, me being as a student, I felt embarrassed, and also unable to relate to peers (although) they ..experiencing their own similar issues, too ... so the isolations really exacerbates, the feelings of loneliness, too." (Participant 32)</p> <p>"And you know I don't want him to pay my whole life. So I definitely have to say to them, look, I really appreciate you offering to pay for this so that we can see, like, see each other or enjoy this time. But I don't. I just it doesn't feel right that you're paying for this stuff just so that I can get through the week or cause he's working full time." (Participant 53)</p> <p>"I've had to quit some social gatherings just to save costs. I've had to shun some friendly get to get away just so I ... have what to sustain on for the week or for the month." (Participant 35)</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| | | <p>"I try to cook from scratch a lot. Which obviously is time consuming. But we don't like have money really to go and do take away or uber eats, I mean, that's a luxury. You know. We don't go out for dinners as a family, or anything like that ... my husband and I tend to socialize very separately, because it's cheaper just for one of us to go out." (Participant 56)</p> <p>"Maybe if my friends asked me to go to the restaurant, I will say no. If the budget is over." (Participant 38)</p> <p>"You cannot actually socialise with many of your friends because they're gonna go out and have some drinks or anything, but you cannot afford it." (Participant 47)</p> <p>"For example, if I want to go outside for fun, I should just consider. I should very carefully consider about the payment. How much money should I pay for this activity? Can I afford that?" (Participant 9)</p> |
| 2. Financial buoyancy | <p>Students' ability to afford basic needs during study including the impact of emergency expenses. Students explored both the contributing factors and impacts of decreased financial security while studying. Students expressed that the level of financial insecurity they faced exceeded their expectations when commencing study and led to impacted quality of life across many areas including food, housing, and health.</p> | <p>(post an accident student was unable to work and needed to basic living expenses covered) "Savings, but I didn't want to use my savings, (and) so I (used) my leaves. I didn't use leave (previously). I worked there for more than a year, so use all my leave(s,) the annual leave(s), everything I use them." (Participant 18)</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Basic living costs adequacy | Supporting day-to-day living costs, such as paying for utilities, transport, and basic non-food essentials, including hygiene and clothing. | <p>“So my family will pay the tuition fee for me, and the living cost is just covered by myself. So I do a lot of part of jobs just to support myself.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>(International student not eligible for student travel – NSW) “Aspect of a travel cost (to Uni and back) that has also been a very big issue for me to. I have one of my friend, who has also been very good assistance to me; his background is kind of very much better than my background, so he has been of a good support to me on the aspect of transportation.” (Participant 17)</p> <p>“I tried ... to work, you know, as a part time ... trying to make ends meet, you know, to, you know, get something doing in addition to schooling, so that I can try to assist myself financially.” (Participant 26)</p> <p>“(It) is difficult, paying for rent, paying for school fees, then also for feeding and clothing and all those things right ... is not easy.” (Participant 62)</p> |
| Income sources reliability | <p>Sources of money throughout study was variable and affected students’ capacity to maintain their wellbeing.</p> <p>Students articulated this was often strained and restricted their ability to obtain some incoming money, especially if on placement or unpaid internships, leading to increased financial stress.</p> | <p>“So my family will pay the tuition fee for me, and the living cost is just covered by myself. So I do a lot of part of jobs just to support myself.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>“(I) struggle to sleep. If I'm you know I mean, you know, every day I think about money, really. But I do find it hard to sleep if I'm really worrying about it.” (Participant 56)</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| | <p>Multiple sources of income were utilised by students, with international students in particular finding difficulty obtaining any financial support. Some students expressed awareness of the deeper financial implications of lost income.</p> | <p>“It’s cost me in HECS. It’s cost me in income, potential income earning, you know, all of those things.” (Participant 56)</p> |
| <p>Student financial literacy</p> | <p>The ability to budget, prioritise purchases, and save, including financial planning prior to placement, was identified as crucial by some students.</p> <p>Students also described the preparation and planning they had done in advance of study to increase their financial security. This was often linked to information provided by university in earlier years of the degree that prompted students to save or budget to prepare financially and the use of apps and short courses.</p> | <p>“I did a lot of like the financial literacy education. I went out and sort that out for myself, because I’m not necessarily like the biggest finance gal ... I went out, and I sought the information for myself, because I was like I need to get through this in order to do what I actually want to do ago, I need to have some sort. Sorry. I need to have some sort of plan.” (Participant 20)</p> <p>“We have financial counselling. You know, that’s been offered by the University Student Service Department ... Yes, these services have been helpful because they have provided valuable guidance on yeah, budgeting strategies, you know, that has been tailored specifically for students living on tight budgets.” (Participant 28)</p> <p>“I closely budget my expenses I prioritise the necessities (against) discretionary spending.” (Participant 30)</p> <p>“I’m lucky that I’m very financially savvy, and I love numbers. So I have a little excel spreadsheet, and I have, like all of my different costs and my income sources.” (Participant 31)</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|--|---|--|
| Aggravating agents | | |
| Identifiable vulnerable student groups | Specific groups face additional barriers to financial buoyancy, including international students (for example, limited awareness or embarrassment in seeking support) and other at-risk cohorts such as students living with disability, sole parents/carers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. | <p>“But nowadays, when I try to ... finish my PhD. I cannot get any reduction of my tuition fees. I think it just. They don't consider this at all. They just, I think they don't pay enough attention to the students like us.” (Participant 1; International Student)</p> <p>“I think most of them from Southeast Asian, like India, Bangladesh on Nepal. So most of them they are that in the same situation like me, that would also have have to attend the a part-time job to to cover the the rent or food like me. I think. Yeah, this could be a common situation in my degree...P16</p> <p>“Because I'm under 22, I ... Still classified as a dependent, even though I have been listed on independent lease. And that ... because ... my dad, makes too much money, even though he doesn't support me. So because of that, I am rendered ineligible for things like any Centrelink benefits, and subsequently any New South Wales government grants or scholarships. I am singularly eligible for any university run scholarships.” (Participant 20)</p> <p>“It does put a bit of pressure on us. My husband and I, because we don't really know what I'm working and also because I have kids ... if I'm doing relief teaching as well as casual shifts in a daycare ... it's quite hard for me to take it, because I've got to organize getting kids to school.” (Participant 56)</p> <p>“At least 50 to 60% of the students overseas are having the same problems I am facing jobs, expensive rent expensive</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|--|--|--|
| | | <p>groceries. And not to mention the huge burden of tuition.” (Participant 64)</p> <p>“Medical insurance, because when you're international (student) you need medical insurance. But the problem is that when you take a temporary graduate visa, you need to have a specific cover that is called overseas students health cover ... So the choice would be either A, pay an exorbitant amount of money, aka \$430 a month, but at least you can get some discount on doctors and whatnot, or Option B, live vicariously, spend \$140 for two people, and we have absolutely nothing under our name except the legal right to stay here.” (Participant 63)</p> |
| University support services transparency | <p>The need for transparent and accessible support services for all students and resources before and during study was discussed. Some students did not feel they were supported in their study or that they could reach out for help when needed. University Study Coordinators/Support Staff emerged as a key support system who either enabled students to be best prepared and facilitated access to key services and resources, or alternatively left students feeling as if they had no one to reach out to when struggling.</p> <p>Students saw university support staff and academic coordinators as a source of valuable information and an initial point of contact when struggling, while others were disappointed at the lack of information</p> | <p>“So, they have an Inclusion team ... I wasn't really aware of a lot of what was going on until much later in the semester. It just wasn't something that was really (communicated to students well).” (Participant 65)</p> <p>“There are support available for student of my class. So I have made my application, but I've not been granted ... I don't know why. Every time I go there they continue telling me that is pending. ... I happen to discuss with some other student. And they told me that is always similar, something that when like something like they run out of money that they will call us. That. I should just be patient. Yes, yeah, I think, the university should try to see how to assist people that are financially not capable to meet their academic views.” (Participant 17)</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| | shared with students prior to study and therefore did not see their university support staff or academic coordinators as an asset to support their study experience. | <p>“I think that the university should try to increase access to financial aids like providing more need-based scholarships. Mostly based on the scholarship grants and emergency funds so simply and simplify the applications process and also ensure that students are aware of all available resources in place.” (Participant 32)</p> <p>“I ended up getting a counsellor this year through UOW - the Free counselling session.” (Participant 53)</p> <p>“My course Coordinator was very willing to meet with me and discuss my options.” (Participant 56)</p> <p>“There was a rule that student can borrow a laptop for 24 hours. Then I have to go back, return the laptop and renew it. Suddenly they change the rule, and they say that where a student borrows a laptop for 24 hours he can't borrow it again. So you have to wait another day.” (Participant 64)</p> |
| University connectedness | Felt experience of being part of the university community and being valued. | <p>(As a PhD student with Professor's job under threat) “My past experience of the with ... XXX I just think ... I feel I'm not part of this Uni anymore.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>“I believe my situation has affected me ... my sense of belonging in the university community making me feel like I kind of don't fit in or can't or can't fully participate in the activities going on.” (Participant 27)</p> |

| Name | Description | Key quote |
|--|--|---|
| Ability to prioritise health | <p>The capacity to prioritise personal health and choices made regarding which aspects of health are prioritised due to limited time, money, and energy was discussed by students.</p> <p>Students revealed facing levels of financial stress that necessitated not only decisions on whether to prioritise health, but also being forced to choose between multiple aspects of personal health. Time and energy were also major barriers, especially when it came to sleep and regular exercise. Participants noted that these types of changes in lifestyle also impacted their study performance and greater quality of life. Participants frequently attempted to prioritise nutritious food during placement, but many found this led to other types of financial stress or came at the cost of worse health outcomes in other areas.</p> | <p>“I had an accident in August, so I had to extend by deadline (PhD proposal) I'm okay. I just had to stay home ... for a month. I couldn't go to work for two months more than two months.” (Participant 18)</p> <p>“(I've) got the extra hurdles of (for my) health, which is even more complex than most, I guess. So (I've) got ... (to) pay for (my nasogastric feed as well as just (my) normal daily living like it's crazy, challenging.” (Participant 31)</p> |
| Education materials and placement requirements | Ability to purchase needed quality education materials such as computer, textbooks, uniforms, and attend and participate successfully in placements such as rural or remote as part of the recommended or required learning outcomes. | <p>“I want to purchase something like a a laptop. If my laptop is broken, or just planning a travel in Australia or somewhere else. I don't have much. I don't have much choice and much that much money to to reach that goal I would say.” (Participant 16)</p> <p>“I've had to make difficult, difficult decisions ... such as choosing between maybe buying a textbook or paying for food and sacrificing social activities just to save money.” (Participant 27)</p> |

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| | | <p>“There’s like this Med camp where, if you don’t go. You’re not like you’re not sure if we can have (miss for) fear of missing out (on critical learning), and that’s like 300 and something dollars straight off like when you start.” (Participant 53)</p> |
| Competitiveness for funding sources | Students ability to access grants and scholarships can be compromised by criteria beyond their control. | <p>“It seems that a lot of Phd students they’re not just like 25 years old. They got their PhD Degree in their hometown. They come from some Middle Eastern country, they even professors there. They come to this country just for immigration purposes. We know that. (And I) try to apply for scholarship, like the XX Uni. (the criterion for success is around) how many papers I have. But for young students like me just starting my PhD journey. I have no publications. It’s pretty common ... so yeah, consider this. I cannot compete with them.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>“I wasn’t eligible for any of the scholarships that were provided ... I just didn’t have any access to scholarships like other students.” (Participant 31)</p> |
| Enabling employment | <p>Employment as a source of income during study was critical for some students, with normal working capacity severely stretched to unhealthy levels for some, especially during required placements.</p> <p>Employment during and in between studies was a common source of income for participants but was connected to decreased time for overall self-care and impacted mental health, physical health, academics, and social connection. Students also</p> | <p>“...it depends on the job, the hospitality part-time job that I get. And also, it also depends on the restaurant. They pay good or they pay high, you know.” (Participant 14)</p> <p>“I have two casual jobs which mentally is quite challenging, because day to day I don’t even really know if I’m working, or, you know, like week to week. I don’t know what I’m working, so I can’t really budget.” (Participant 56)</p> |

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| | <p>expressed difficulty in finding employment due to limited and sporadic availability between studies. Facilitation by university to find employment would be valued especially for international students or students away from home. Some students need to undertake off the books employment.</p> | <p>“My boss at my law firm has been very understanding.” (Participant 58)</p> |
| <p>Alternative income sources</p> | <p>Students’ access to sources of income other than traditional employment, for example, study grants, scholarships, youth allowance, student loans, and personal reserved funds for emergency, was crucial for some students while not accessible for others.</p> <p>Alternative income sources provided financial relief for many students, but grants and government payments were often not accessible for international students. Students also described scholarships that were means tested without taking unpaid study into account, or others that were only paid after the completion of a study block.</p> | <p>“I did plan ahead, and I do have savings that if shit hits the fan. I do have something.” (Participant 31)</p> <p>“I’m on a scholarship provided by the government of my country, Saudi Arabia. So, like, it’s 100% scholarship. So like, they pay for the tuition fees, so like, I don’t have any difficulty with that. The only thing that I’m paying for is, like, the life expenses and the accommodation.” (Participant 52)</p> <p>“I got a low, low (loan) ... yeah, (I) apply for the loan. For student loan in my (home) country.” (Participant 38)</p> <p>“Centrelink took a little while to come in ... there’s like a ... I don’t know if consistent is the right word, but a unchanging three month period.” (Participant 53)</p> <p>“Sometimes I’ll give out my name to them to help me put it in the program or any support system, but at the end of the day, I ... my name is not there.” (Participant 62)</p> |
| <p>Course structure/requirements</p> | <p>The structure of the degree as a whole, including degree configuration and flexibility of subject</p> | <p>“So I’m doing nutrition, and I just finished the bachelor of nutrition and dietetics honours. And so in your 3rd year you’re required to come in for your dietetics care classes, and those</p> |

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| | <p>completion timetables was identified as an opportunity or as a barrier by students.</p> <p>Participants with flexible study arrangements, such as four day working weeks, or fewer weeks at a time on placement, found that this contributed to increased financial security in comparison to other studies due to increased ability to work, especially on weekdays. Those who had more rigid study structures expressed that this decreased their ability to earn money, with study blocks over five weeks at a time causing high financial stress.</p> | <p>can be two full days. So a full Tuesday and a full Wednesday, so it could be anywhere from like 8.30 to like 4.30, essentially the whole day." (Participant 44)</p> <p>"So I do need to discuss that and find out ... if there's any flexibility (around placement), and how that can be done. Should I be back at work? And if there's any flexibility in where I can do that." (Participant 65)</p> <p>"The medical school literally tell you you shouldn't work. You will most likely be stressed and might even fail." (Participant 53)</p> <p>"We work as much as we can. But we also want to prioritise studying because it's really important for us to get into the honours and into the masters ... we've also tried to stop, maybe with the cleaning because we've also heard that with the masters, at least, they ask for experience within psychology paid experience. So it's also challenging to find a job that fits that kind of criteria." (Participant 45)</p> |
| Course cost | Identifying the cost of the course with or without living costs. | <p>"I think (there should be clearer communication) upfront to help students. This is how much your degree is gonna cost...this is the basic cost of your degree." (Participant 1)</p> <p>"I mean, if you were to buy a house, you know exactly. You know exactly what you're signing your contract. What's in the contract? You know exactly what all your costs are." (Participant 65)</p> |

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| | | <p>“It was definitely a big financial consideration. For me, even just starting the degree (medicine).” (Participant 53)</p> <p>“I've got to make this worth it because of the cost to my family and the pressure it's putting on everyone. So you know, I don't want to do a crappy job. I want to do a good job so that I look hireable and Tapping: and appealing once I finish.” (Participant 56)</p> <p>“So my degree this year has cost me \$17,000 on HECS which is great. And then textbooks, I'd probably say around \$400, maybe, which honestly because I bought them second-hand and I bargained on Facebook marketplace.” (Participant 58)</p> |
| Expenses of placement | Extra costs incurred directly as a result of completing placement internship studies were recognised as challenge for some students. Studies away from home were connected to increased expenses. However, students also described other direct expenses, including uniforms, clothing, and travel costs. These costs were not always brought up by university coordinators prior to the start of studies. | <p>“They haven't talked to me about it (placement costs for Social Work). They've just said that there is the requirement in year 2 and 3, and what those requirements are so, and that it's a 3-month requirement in year 2 and a 6-month requirement in year 3 ... Oh, well, it's there. But it's for you to worry about, like you know. Here it is. But that's not out, you know. That's not for us to consent ourselves, if that's your personal situation ... adds to the burden of stress.” (Participant 65)</p> <p>“Obviously, the root cause is, you know, government payments, etc. Are very insufficient, and that you know you're not paid to study or go on placement.” (Participant 31)</p> <p>“In my 2-year, full-time course, there's 12 weeks of unpaid work.” (Participant 56)</p> |

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| | | <p>“I almost quit because I still don't know how we're paying for that (placement).” (Participant 58)</p> <p>“Now it's been four years that we've (partner and student) been, that we've been in this place, but now, effectively, we've been living two separate lives. She's staying over here. I'm still paying part of the rent, and I am paying the rent for myself down there.” (Participant 63)</p> |
| Work study life balance | Identifying when students need to work to survive impacted not just their studying ability but overall life balance increasing social isolation. | <p>“... and strict budgeting and balancing this financial responsibility with my academic and personal life has been a very significant challenge for me.” (Participant 17)</p> <p>“I worked the entirety of last year. I took a took a year of leave of absences so that I could, so that I could find serious employment. Yeah, seriously enough to afford a year and yeah, and now I was able to, I was able to afford doing this (medicine).” (Participant 63)</p> |
| Buffering agents | | |
| Access to enough food | <p>Reliable access to appropriate food to meet needs and preferences was discussed as a challenge on study by some participants.</p> <p>Participants faced food insecurity while on study with difficulty obtaining economic access to both enough food and to their food preferences.</p> <p>Participants also vocalised concerns about their</p> | <p>“To be very kind of (about food intake). Honest. I find it very hard to eat a proper meal. Oh, but I'm just not really concerned, because I know whatever I'm going through right now is just temporary. So I try to see how I can just manage myself ... yeah I just had to skip, skip some meals ... yeah, just to convert the money to other pressing bills.” (Participant 17)</p> <p>“One of the pressing issues is the struggle to afford basic essential needs like food.” (Participant 30)</p> |

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| | <p>ability to meet their nutrient requirements due to food insecurity. One participant detailed choosing cheaper staple options when food shopping and trying to make this amount of food last for a longer time.</p> | <p>“I had a poor nutrition and food(s) insecurity (but) there's a limited financial resources that, and that leads to the full insecurity, too.” (Participant 32)</p> <p>“Food expenses really take the majority (of my budget).” (Participant 52)</p> <p>“I've even skipped meals just so I could save money.” (Participant 36)</p> |
| <p>Access to food preferences</p> | <p>Some students' ability to choose food that met both their taste and nutrition preferences was limited during placement.</p> <p>These participants detailed the repetitive meals they ate on study and the reduced nutritional quality of this limited variety. Participants attempted to prioritise nutritious food during study but found this often came at a cost in other areas of health or financial security. Other participants felt the social impacts of food insecurity as they were unable to participate in social occasions centred around food.</p> | <p>“I was able to have a coffee this week. I already had one, but this person had gave me one (in addition). So then next week I'm not allowed to have one, even though I wanted to wanted to, so I can pay that person back (repay them with a coffee from my weekly coffee allowance).” (Participant 31)</p> <p>“(We cant) buy nicer food or nicer meat, or whatever. So now we're back to, you know, shopping at Audi, which still has great food and still has good things. We can still buy nice stuff. But yeah, we are a bit more cautious, and we certainly look at the sales a lot more.” (Participant 65)</p> <p>“I want to eat good food, not just all the food, you know. It's about fried food, or just make me feel full.” (Participant 38)</p> <p>“And then I actually feel more sluggish and more tired, because, like, I'm not eating the foods that I want, and you can get like quite constipated. And things like that which for me ... gives me</p> |

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| | | <p>a lot of pain because it makes my medical condition worse.” (Participant 31)</p> <p>“And then, when I did that silly thing of not eating meat (to save money) for a while. I then became iron deficient and needed to get blood tests to confirm and go get, you know, tablets for it.” (Participant 53)</p> <p>“Well, it’s been for like seven months that I’ve been eating nothing but broccoli, chicken and eggs, all of these frozen well, except the eggs.” (Participant 63)</p> |
| Housing security | <p>The ability to maintain suitable and reliable housing both at home and away on study added to the burden felt by some participants.</p> <p>Participants who had access to free accommodation on studies away from home expressed relief provided by this aid, while other participants reflected on accommodation expenses as a barrier to undertaking rural and interstate studies. Studies away from home led to increased financial stress associated with housing security, particularly for participants who rented or had a mortgage and had to face increased costs. Participants also detailed calculated risks taken, such as unauthorised subletting while away from home, and one participant spoke about risking housing status altogether.</p> | <p>“One of the significant issues for me has been the high cost of living in Melbourne. You know the rent, and every expense(s), you know, can take a take up a large and portion of my budget.” (Participant 28)</p> <p>“The rent is 160 per week excluding bills, and and I don't know is there any other cheapest option available here or not? Also the Uni accommodation is like too high.” (Participant 7)</p> <p>“There is a huge difference, you know, between the how inflation has escalated and the like, housing rent. There is a huge difference.” (Participant 51)</p> <p>“I live in university accommodation, so I just pay for the rent. Like, I don't pay for, for, for water and electricity or internet, just for the rent, and then everything is provided.” (Participant 52)</p> |

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| | | <p>“We have this fridge over here that we've been talking about, actually, now ... we've been begging our landlord to say, look, we are going to pay for a new one, but at least, can we take this out.” (Participant 63)</p> <p>“The accommodation fee is totally higher than I receive(d) ... my accommodation here I live in campus, and I need to spend \$305 per week.” (Participant 38)</p> |
| Use of charitable support services | Accessing alternative support services to protect limited funds such as foodbank, food pantries, op shops. | <p>“We have the the kitchens, and you know ... what do they call them? The community like the community (food hubs) ... yeah, which are brilliant. Okay, they are so good. And I have heard some positive comments from students about that where they've gone. I've gone down to the community, you know the community shop front or the community whatever. And oh, you know I grabbed some milk and I grabbed this, and I grab some toiletries, and it was all free. Oh, my God! Like I felt like I was stealing stuff like it was just bizarre.” (Participant 65)</p> <p>“(The) food expense is so high, and I am also taking the help from [blinded] Food Pantry that is also a good option, but it's (only available) in two days in week. Tuesday and Thursday.” (Participant 7)</p> <p>“I've even accessed the XXX pulse pantry when we were there on Mondays they would let us go out of hours.” (Participant 53)</p> <p>“The pulse pantry helped a lot ... in Wollongong Central they also hand out some veggies and groceries.” (Participant 64)</p> |

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| Coping mechanisms/resilience | Means of managing issues such as money to limit financial stress. | <p>“I will make sure I will ... take a note of every expense(s).” (Participant 38)</p> <p>“I rely on part-time work scholarships and strict budgeting and balancing this financial responsibility with my academic and personal life.” (Participant 17)</p> <p>“I use my money judicious judiciously because I work for it. And I want to use it mainly for my study. So every other extra curriculum activities I don't like participating mainly so that I won't.” (Participant 17)</p> <p>“I'm a huge spreadsheet girly. I would put in. All the ingredients that I had existing in my pantry. and all the ingredients that I could get for under \$150, and then I would plan out my meals and freeze them, and label them with what day it was for.” (Participant 20)</p> <p>“We have no savings. We've had to pull off our mortgage on occasion.” (Participant 56)</p> |
| Social support networks | Support of students during study often impacted student wellbeing, with a lack of support sometimes leading to feelings of isolation. Social support from multiple sources is vital for student wellbeing, although study demands can limit students' ability to access support from friends, family, and university staff. Different support networks were often able to provide emotional and social support. However, | <p>“(My) roommate ... he worked for a Chinese car company, so ... he just introduced (me for) a job for me.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>“They (senior students from home country) are very supportive. They are giving me shelter I am. I am super blessed that they are giving me shelter in my bad days. I am thankful to them.” (Participant 7)</p> |

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| | <p>students who did not feel supported instead faced isolation as described by this participant.</p> | <p>“It’s kind of trying times or how we have is each other. So we just have to share our experience and hope can be a lack of comfort to each other.” (Participant 35)</p> <p>“I’ve got some few international friends just like me, and I’ve got ... domestic friends. So we kind of keep an open conversation, tend to know what’s going on with our private lives. What is bothering us? What’s where we’re finding challenges to cope around the school premises, and of(f) campus.” (Participant 36)</p> <p>“Also I feel a bit excluded sometimes as well with my friends, because I can’t do all the things that they’re doing. They’re all like pissed off and like, you know, like, may be talking about me like sounds so high school. But yeah.” (Participant 56)</p> |
| <p>Emotional support networks</p> | <p>Emotional support received during study from people such as friends, family, and other loved ones or a lack of understanding from the same people impacted some students’ experiences.</p> <p>Friends and family were key pillars of social and emotional support for students on placement. Participants described support or lack of support impacting mental health and motivation to make it through their studies.</p> | <p>“I actually have good friend connection, though I don’t go out much, but you know they come for me. They come through for me rather when I need them, the most.” (Participant 28)</p> <p>“And I was just emotionally broken, and as I have no peers and close friends with here. That’s a nice experience ... have a talk to you (the interviewer). And I also enjoyed that. Someone (just to) listen to me. My story, and I feel very happy.” (Participant 7)</p> |
| <p>Financial support from others</p> | <p>Students who are able to access financial support from parents, partners, family and friends for big expenditure or unexpected or emergency financial issues.</p> | <p>“They (parents) still can cover my tuition fee, but it’s a PhD. Maybe takes up to 5 years to complete. It’s a lot of money ... but I don’t think they can do this for a long time, maybe up to three years, so we just change the plan. They nowadays just pay the</p> |

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| | | <p>tuition fee for me. So the rest of the living cost of money I just earned by myself ... generally maybe 2,000 per month, so maybe at least 20,000 per year to cover my living cost.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>“I've got family back (home) ... trying to help me. I'm sending my monthly invoice (to them for financial help).” (Participant 27)</p> <p>“Depending on who you're with (partner), like when you're with someone else who's financially struggling like it's kind of nice to have someone who can go. Yeah, treat yourself. You can buy that small, really like thing that really is only small, but it would mean a concession compared to someone else who'd be like 'lol', just buy the avocado like it's fine. Who cares like?” (Participant 53)</p> <p>“Yeah, it is like definitely stressful when it it can put stress on your relationships as well like I have partner in Sydney still, and there's definitely times where I'm financially stressed.” (Participant 53)</p> |